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# HINTS

DESIGNED TO REGULATE

THE

INTERCOURSE OF CHRISTIANS.

---

By W. B. SPRAGUE, D. D.

PASTOR OF THE SECOND PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH IN ALBANY.

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# CONTENTS.

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PREFACE, ..... v.

## PART I.

### INTERCOURSE OF CHRISTIANS WITH EACH OTHER.

#### CHAPTER I.

Object of christian intercourse, ..... 1

#### CHAPTER II.

Grounds of christian intercourse, ..... 13

#### CHAPTER III.

Hindrances to christian intercourse, ..... 23

#### CHAPTER IV.

Mode of conducting christian intercourse, ..... 37

#### CHAPTER V.

Occasions of christian intercourse, ..... 45

#### CHAPTER VI.

Opportunities for christian intercourse, ..... 55

#### CHAPTER VII.

Christian intercourse in the family, ..... 65

#### CHAPTER VIII.

Christian intercourse of youth, ..... 77

#### CHAPTER IX.

Christian intercourse between the higher and lower classes, 87

## CHAPTER X.

Epistolary intercourse among christians,.....	99
---	----

## CHAPTER XI.

Perversion of christian intercourse,.....	109
---	-----

## CHAPTER XII.

Obligations to christian intercourse from the peculiar character of the age, .....	123
--	-----

**PART II.****INTERCOURSE OF CHRISTIANS WITH THE WORLD.**

## CHAPTER I.

The christian's intercourse with the world in the common concerns of life, .....	133
--	-----

## CHAPTER II.

The christian's intercourse with the world in the social circle, .....	151
--	-----

## CHAPTER III.

Considerations prohibiting the christian from the gaieties of the world,.....	165
---	-----

## CHAPTER IV.

Pleas of the professed christian for mingling in the gaieties of the world, considered,.....	183
--	-----

## CHAPTER V.

Responsibility of christians in the higher walks of life, in respect to the prevailing conformity to the world,.....	205
--	-----

## CHAPTER VI.

The christian's intercourse with the unrenewed sinner in respect to his salvation,.....	219
---	-----

## PREFACE.

THE design of this little work is to aid the general efficiency of the church by an attempt to elevate the standard of christian character. In contemplating the intercourse of professors of religion in various conditions, and in different relations, the author has gone over a somewhat extensive field of christian duty ; and the minuteness with which some points are treated is owing to his conviction that, while they enter deeply into the formation of a consistent religious character, they receive from the mass of christians a degree of attention by no means proportioned to their importance. He is willing to hope that the *young* christian especially may here find some hints which may serve to put him on his guard against certain courses to which his circumstances may peculiarly expose him, and which are almost sure to issue in a grievous state of backsliding.

The author has often felt the need of some little manual on this subject to put into the hands of professors of religion, but had never even thought of attempting to furnish one, until it was suggested by a circumstance too unimportant to be here noticed, which occurred within his

own pastoral experience. The reader will scarcely need be informed that it has been prepared in great haste, though the author is not disposed to urge this as an apology for its imperfections ; and he certainly would not have given it to the world, had he not indulged the hope that it might prove in some degree acceptable and useful to the christian public.

*Albany, April 15, 1834.*

## PART I.

### INTERCOURSE OF CHRISTIANS WITH EACH OTHER.

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#### CHAPTER I.

##### OBJECT OF CHRISTIAN INTERCOURSE.

IT is the part of wisdom to have distinctly before us, in whatever we undertake, some worthy and useful object. Actions performed at random, and without reference to any important end, may no doubt often lead to highly beneficial results ; but we expect the greatest amount of good will be accomplished, where the mind has fastened upon some noble object, and habitually directs its efforts to it, as means to the attainment of an end. This general remark applies to the subject on which we are entering : if christians will contemplate to the best advantage the duty which is to be presented and urged in the following pages, or if they will set themselves to the performance of it in the most acceptable and useful manner, they must hold vividly to their minds the great ends it is designed to accomplish. To show WHAT THESE ENDS ARE, is the design of the present chapter. They may be reduced to two :

1. *The religious improvement of the individuals immediately concerned.* This improvement has respect both to the intellect and the heart ; or to knowledge and feeling.

There is scarcely any thing more surprising, than the amount of ignorance which exists in the church, in respect to the great truths of religion. And this ignorance is, by no means, exclusively, or even chiefly, to be found among professors in the humbler walks of life ; on the contrary, it is quite as frequently met with in circles of general intelligence and refinement. There are, at this moment, men in our country, who occupy important stations in civil society, and are thoroughly versed in law and politics, and can plead eloquently in defence of the rights of their fellow-men, and who withal come to the communion table as often as it is spread, who are yet mere striplings, and scarcely more than babes, in the knowledge of divine truth. On great questions of national policy, their opinion possesses an almost oracular authority ; but in respect to the system of divine truth, there is scarcely a child in the sabbath school but could teach them ; and scarcely an adroit heretic, by whose wiles they might not be taken. And hence it comes to pass that not a small number who are distinguished for general intellectual culture, and have been educated to respect religion, and perhaps have even made a profession of it, have either gone over to blank infidelity, or have settled down so near its borders as to hold intimate communion with it. If their minds had been pre-occupied with the great truths and principles of christianity, there would have been some security against this disastrous result : at least infidelity or error never could have gained the ground without a

sharp conflict with their previous convictions ; but as they had no convictions except of the most vague and feeble kind, it required but a breath to dissipate them, and leave an open field in which the infidel or the heretic might scatter his tares, with all but an assurance that they would take effect.

The ignorance of divine truth to which I have referred, is the result of that melancholy practical indifference which prevails so extensively in the higher circles of society, to all the great interests of religion. But the same evil exists under other circumstances, in which it is to be referred to a very different cause. There are professors of religion, and no doubt true christians, who take up the erroneous idea, that religious knowledge makes but an unimportant element in the christian character ; and with some confused notions of the teachings of the Spirit, as if they were designed, in some degree, to supersede the written revelation, they place an improper reliance on supernatural aid, and in their religious reflections and conversations, never think of ranging beyond a little circle of common places. With persons of this description, the great and almost the only desideratum is strong and glowing feeling ; and without stopping to inquire whence it originates, or what are the elements of which it is composed, they too hastily conclude, whether it exists in themselves or others, that it indicates a true regeneration. And some, in the blindness of their zeal, will even discourage the diligent study of God's word as unnecessary ; and will elevate their own impressions and feelings far above this infallible standard. I do not say that there are no persons of this general description who have knowledge enough of divine truth to be brought un-

der its sanctifying influence ; but surely, if they are christians, they are christians of a dwarfish stature, and will even be saved so as by fire.

But it is unnecessary to go more particularly into the causes of this ignorance of divine truth which prevails so extensively among professors of religion : suffice it to say that its existence is unquestionable ; and that just in proportion as it exists, it mars the beauty of christian character, and hinders the progress of evangelical piety. Never was there a more false and dangerous maxim, than that “ignorance is the mother of devotion :” she is the mother of fanaticism, of superstition, of delusion ; but the spirit of genuine devotion knows her only as an enemy. It can never be too carefully borne in mind that the truths of the bible constitute the principles of religious character ; and that whatever may be the strength of the feelings which we call religious, if they are not brought into operation in view of divine truth, they cannot be considered as the exercise of the right spirit. An individual may indeed have much religious knowledge, and his feelings may be all wrong notwithstanding ; but while he remains in bondage to ignorance or error, though he may have much feeling, it were an absurdity to suppose that it should be the operation of a principle of evangelical piety ; or if it be admitted that a principle of piety has been implanted in the heart, the vigor of its exercises will only be in proportion to the small amount of truth which has gained a lodgment in the understanding.

Let it be remembered, moreover, that, as it is the tendency of important truth of every kind, received into the mind, to invigorate the faculties, and fit them for more intense and successful application, so this is especially

true of the great doctrines of religion ; for there is nothing within the reach of human intelligence which partakes so much of the grandeur of the Divinity ; and these truths, we know, occupy the ever brightening faculties of angels, and will occupy the minds of the redeemed, while they expand in the beauty and strength of an endless renovation. If it is desirable to the christian then that his intellectual powers should grow brighter and stronger, as part of his preparation for mingling in nobler employments and with higher orders of intelligence, when he shall have passed within the vail, surely it becomes him now to discipline his faculties by vigorous exercise, and especially by fixing them in devout contemplation on those wonderful truths of the divine revelation into which angels desire to look.

Is it not obvious then that the gaining of religious knowledge, and the consequent improvement of the intellectual powers, is an object worthy to be kept in view in the intercourse of christians ? Supposing them on an equality in respect to the vigor of their powers and the extent of their acquisitions, still, by bringing their minds in contact upon these great and interesting subjects, it is scarcely possible but that they should reflect some new light upon each other, and quicken each other's faculties into brighter and bolder exercise. But where there is a great inequality between the individuals, the one being highly improved, the other comparatively ignorant, there may be an opportunity furnished even by a brief season of intercourse, for blessing and being blessed, for imparting and receiving knowledge, which may contribute to the permanent improvement and elevation of the character, far beyond our highest conceptions.

But if the improvement of the intellect is to be kept in view in the intercourse which christians have with each other, so also is the culture of the heart : if the attainment of religious knowledge is to be regarded as a worthy object, not less so surely is the growth of religious feeling. And here the first thing to be considered is, that it should be genuine religious feeling that is aimed at ; for every evangelical affection has its counterfeits ; and some of these counterfeits bear so strong a resemblance to the feeling which they attempt to imitate, that a superficial observer will not readily mark the difference between them ; and hence no doubt many are fatally deceived in the estimate which they form of their own experience ; while some true christians doubtless count much upon many of their exercises as being highly spiritual, which are really to be referred to nothing beyond an ardent temperament, or some other peculiarity in their physical constitution. True religion, though it begins in the understanding, has its seat especially in the heart ; and where there is habitually no feeling, it is safe to conclude that there is no religion ; though it is equally certain, on the other hand, that there may be much feeling, and yet the heart be an utter stranger to all genuine impressions of divine truth.

Let it be the object of every christian then, in mingling with his fellow christians, to get his own gracious affections quickened into livelier exercise, and to endeavor to cherish and improve the graces of the Spirit in those with whom he associates. Suppose you are in a state of great spiritual prosperity ; and experience daily the comfort of intimate communion with God ; and are successful in your conflict with temptation ; and are going rapid-

ly forward in a career of spiritual enjoyment and active usefulness—But still you need the benefit of christian intercourse, to enable you to retain the prosperity which you enjoy ; and more than that, let your prosperity be as great as it may, you have but a partially sanctified heart, and you are liable every moment to be brought into captivity to the law of sin, and you need the aid which you can derive from your fellow christians, to carry forward the work of your sanctification. If the love of Christ is already in your heart, you need to have it more richly shed abroad there : if the graces of humility, and charity, and faith, and hope, have been wrought in you by the Holy Spirit, you need to have them brightened into purer and more vigorous exercise : if you have had strength to resist the temptations, and discharge the duties, to which you have been called hitherto, you need to have your strength increased in the prospect of duties still more arduous, of temptations still more formidable, which may present themselves to you hereafter. And if it were a supposable case that *you* needed not the aids of christian intercourse, yet this surely is not true of your fellow christians ; for not only are they, like yourself, but partially sanctified, but many of them are timid and need to be encouraged ; are wandering and need to be reclaimed ; are exposed to grievous temptations and need to be admonished ; and by mingling with them, though you should receive no good yourself, you may be instrumental of communicating blessings the value of which you are unable to comprehend.

There is no grace of the christian character which is more directly fostered by the intercourse of which I am speaking, than brotherly love. Scarcely any thing is more

important than this to the general growth of piety ; for while it is in itself an essential part of piety, and looks directly towards the perfect love and blessed communion that reigns in heaven, it unites the hearts and hands of christians in those exercises and operations which have a direct bearing on the growth of every part of christian character. It is this delightful affection indeed which constitutes one of the main springs of christian intercourse ; but christian intercourse in its turn warms this affection into a more lively exercise. It is possible, no doubt, for a professor of religion to mingle with his fellow professors, and yet this effect of which I am speaking, not be realized ; but it is not possible that this should happen, if their intercourse is conducted on truly evangelical principles.

Let no one suppose that, because in the preceding remarks, the culture of the intellect and the culture of the heart have been separately considered as objects of christian intercourse, therefore they are always to be kept distinct from each other in the efforts which are made for their attainment. The truth is that they are, to a great extent, inseparably connected ; and necessarily imply and involve each other. For suppose it be the immediate object of a meeting of christians to aid each other in the acquisition of religious knowledge—the truths which are thereby lodged in the mind, and which serve to invigorate the faculties, are also the elements of sanctification ; and the greater the amount of religious knowledge that is gained, the greater the means of the christian's growth in grace. Or suppose the object to be more immediately to quicken each other to a higher tone of christian feeling—This must be done by rendering divine truth more vivid and impressive, so that the very effort to reach the heart

is felt first by the understanding ; and then there is a reflective influence of the heart upon the intellect ; for the warm glow of the affections is thrown back upon the intellectual powers, so that there is, to a great extent, a corresponding vigor and intensity of operation. Many a christian has been mounting up in his spirit towards the perfect purity of heaven, while he has scarcely thought of giving himself to any thing beyond intellectual contemplation ; and on the other hand, many a christian has had his views of divine truth greatly enlarged, and has kindled with fresh desires of intellectual improvement, while his immediate aim has been to get his soul bathed by christian intercourse with the reviving influences of divine grace.

2. The other great end that should be kept in view in the intercourse of christians with each other is, *the salvation of men, and the advancement of the cause of Christ in the world.*

If christians mingle together with a right spirit, there will be an indirect influence exerted towards the attainment of this end, by their increased zeal and spirituality. As the flame of divine love burns more brightly in their hearts, religion will come out with more powerful attraction in their lives ; and wherever they are, the world will be compelled to take knowledge of them that they have been with Jesus. And though this influence of a holy life is silent, scarcely any thing else is so powerful : though the wicked may turn away from pious counsels and instructions, and may resist every direct effort that is made for their salvation, there is something so consistent and beautiful in the life of a devoted christian, that even the scoffer cannot always withstand its influence ; and no

doubt this has often been used by the Holy Spirit to bring the sinner to repentance, when every other means had proved unavailing. And where the general deportment of the christian is, in a high degree, exemplary, and his heart is strongly set on the promotion of the best interests of his fellow men, there will be, along with a general course of holy living, direct vigorous efforts for their salvation. Let christians then in their intercourse with each other, endeavor to strengthen each others' good resolutions, and quicken one another in the divine life, not merely with reference to their own progress in comfort and holiness, but with a view to their carrying with them into the world a more impressive example, and mingling to better purpose with the multitude who forget God.

But christians in their intercourse are to aim at this general object in a more direct manner: they are to be fellow helpers in devising and executing plans which are intended directly for its advancement. They are to report to each other respecting the wants and the woes of their fellow men, as they may have come within their knowledge; and endeavor to impress each other more deeply with the great obligation of sending the gospel to the ends of the earth. They are to stir each other up to nobler purposes and plans of benevolence; and wherever there is a spirit of backwardness discovered, it is to be rebuked; and each one is to be made to feel, so far as possible, his personal responsibility; and the greatness of the cause, and the certainty of its ultimate triumph, and the magnitude of the difficulties to be overcome, and the glory of being a co-worker with God and with angels, are each to be held up in turn, and pressed upon the heart and conscience, as so many powerful incentives not to be weary

in well doing. Look abroad and see what has already been done for the conversion of the world ; witness the wonderful plans which are now in such successful operation, and which are carrying the blessings of salvation rapidly all over the earth ; and believe me, almost every part of this blessed machinery had its origin in christian intercourse ; and not a small part of it in the casual meetings of two or three individuals. Is not this then an object still to be kept in view ? Ought not christians in their intercourse to be more deeply impressed with the obligation of doing good ? Is there not much reason to believe that they have met and associated to little purpose, if no useful plan has been suggested, no quickening influence imparted, no new desire awakened, for the benefit of the world, and the advancement of the Redeemer's cause ?

And now, Christians, let me entreat you to commune with your hearts in reference to the past, and resolve upon increased fidelity in respect to the future. You may have enjoyed the privilege of intercourse with each other for many years—let me ask you whether the legitimate objects of it have been, in any good degree, accomplished in your experience ? Has your intercourse served to increase your stock of religious knowledge ; to enlarge your views of the glory of the gospel ; to invigorate your faculties, and lead you to aspire to intellectual as well as moral perfection ? Has it contributed to strengthen within you the principle of piety ; to cause you to abound more in the graces of the gospel ; to aid you in your conflict with corruption within and temptation without ; to fasten your affections more intensely upon heaven as your final home ? And what effect has it had upon your usefulness—has it served to increase the purity of your ex-

ample before the world, and the vigor of your efforts for the salvation of your fellow men ? If conscience answers that these objects have been but imperfectly attained, and that your mind is clouded with ignorance when it ought to be enlightened ; that your affections are going out after the world when they ought to be going up to heaven ; that your arms have been folded in comparative apathy, when you ought to have been actively engaged in helping forward the great cause of truth and salvation ; then it becomes you to awake to better purposes, to more vigorous efforts, to a holier example. Henceforth improve the privilege of christian intercourse in such a manner, that you shall be constantly going forward under its influence in a career of knowledge, piety and usefulness. Remember, Christian, that it is one of the great means which a gracious Providence has allotted to thee for attaining to the fulness of the stature of a perfect person in Christ ; and for doing thy part towards carrying into effect the great purposes of everlasting love. Improve it then diligently and faithfully ; with thine eye and thine heart fixed upon thy Saviour's honor, the salvation of thy fellow men, and thine own everlasting reward.

## CHAPTER II.

### GROUNDS OF CHRISTIAN INTERCOURSE.

No one who inspects the operations of his own mind, or observes the development of character in others, can doubt that the social principle constitutes one of the primary elements of human nature. It discovers itself in the infant while it is yet in the arms of its mother ; and though it may be directed by education, it can never be annihilated without an essential change in the constitution of man. But though it belongs *essentially* to our nature, it does not belong to it *exclusively* ; for if we ascend the scale of being, and mount up into the dwelling place of angels and seraphs, we find its operation there ; or if we descend into the lower ranks of creation, and watch the beasts of the field, and the fowls of heaven, and even the reptile that creeps upon the earth, there too we discover unequivocal evidences of the existence of the same principle. So far as we know, man possesses it in common not only with all rational, but all sensitive beings.

This principle is the foundation of all human intercourse ; though its operations are of course modified by the intellectual and moral qualities with which it is associated, and the circumstances in which it is brought into exercise. It may and often does operate in bringing together persons of opposite tastes, and tempers, and habits ; but more frequently its influence is manifest in associating

those whose dispositions and circumstances are in some important respects alike. Hence we find that persons of vulgar habits usually herd together ; and on the other hand, men of enlarged minds and elevated characters will scarcely breathe freely in any other than enlightened and dignified society. So too the christian delights most of all in communion with his fellow christians. And the reason is, in each case, that there is something possessed, or aimed at, in common, which brings the social principle into operation. In respect to the disciples of Christ, there is an identity of relation, of character, of pursuit, and of destination.

1. Christians are attracted to each other by an identity of *relation*. They sustain the same relation to the great Father of mercies. Not to refer here to the relation which they in common with all other beings, bear to him as their Creator, they have been peculiarly the objects of his everlasting love. He has written their names in the book of life ; has guarded and led them by a most wise and gracious providence ; and has made provision for their complete and eternal redemption. Jesus Christ has died that he might be their Saviour ; and having passed through the grave into heaven, he now lives to plead the merit of his own blood as the ground of their acceptance ; and the destiny of each disciple is safe, because it is lodged in his hands. The Holy Ghost has been sent down as their Sanctifier and Comforter ;—to dissipate their darkness, to rebuke their despondency, to cheer them in their sorrows, to help their infirmities, to confirm their wavering hopes, and lead them onward to an eternal rest. Every christian sustains the same relation to God ; as having shared in everlasting love, having been bought with redeeming

blood, and subdued and sanctified by almighty grace : Surely such a hallowed and blessed relation to the Head must constitute a delightful bond of union among the members.

But christians sustain the same relation also to the church, or the whole community of the redeemed. Each one is a member of this great family ; and all, whether in heaven or on earth, are brethren. Each one may recognise all the rest as fellow heirs of the same grace, and destined at last to partake of the same glory. Each may see reflected in the rest his Redeemer's image ; and in those who are already glorified, may see it shining in the perfection of beauty. To the members of the church on earth every christian sustains the relation of a fellow traveller through the wilderness ; of a companion in conflicts and trials, as well as in supports and consolations ; and to the members of the church in heaven, the relation of a brother who has already begun to taste the joys of that redemption, which has actually been consummated in *their* immortal glory. No matter though you may be the weakest and the obscurest christian that has a place on the earth, you enjoy an honor in comparison with which all the distinctions of the world fade away—that of belonging to a family which is to reign in a blissful and ever enduring triumph. I ask again, is not here a foundation for the most hallowed intercourse ? Is there not good reason why children of the same family should mingle in intimate communion ?

So also they sustain a common relation to the world. Though they are not now of the world, yet they once were ; they had no better hopes, and were sustained by no higher consolations, and were living for no more worthy

ends, than are the multitude around them who are at this hour exposed to the wrath of God. But through the influence of divine grace, they have had their feet taken out of the horrible pit and the miry clay ; and they are living habitually with this world under their feet, and a better world in their eye. Nevertheless they retain a deep impression of the wretchedness of their former condition, as well as of the grace that has rescued them from it ; and by their own practical acquaintance with the evil of sin, they estimate the guilt and the ruin of those who are still under its dominion. Though they are citizens of another country even an heavenly, they still retain to the unrenewed world the relation of brethren of the same family ; and there rests upon them a common obligation to do all they can to reverse and elevate their destiny. And is not here also a reasonable ground for intercourse ? Are christians surrounded with those who not only possess a common nature with themselves, but in many instances are allied to them by the strongest ties of kindred, and are yet exposed to an everlasting ruin ;—would it not be strange indeed if they were not strongly attracted to each other from the circumstance of their sustaining this common relation ? Is there not something here that appeals irresistibly to their common sympathies, and is fitted to lead to a community of purpose and effort ?

2. There is also an identity of *character* among all the disciples of Christ.

True there are circumstantial differences between the characters of different christians ; owing to a variety in their intellectual and moral constitutions, in the circumstances in which they are placed, in their efforts to advance in piety, and in the measures of divine influence of

which they are the subjects. Nevertheless, in all the essential features of their character, they are alike. They have all been slain by the law, and shut up to the faith of Christ. They have had a principle of holiness implanted in their hearts, which, though, at first, feeble in its operations, is gradually growing stronger, and is destined ultimately to have the complete dominion of the inner man. They are sharers in a common conflict. The heart still retains a degree of corruption, even after the gracious principle has been introduced; and the renewed nature has to struggle with indwelling sin, until the last remains of it are finally exterminated. They have in common all the graces of the gospel;—repentance of sin, confidence in the Saviour, love to God, submission to the divine will, joy in the Holy Ghost, and hope in the everlasting covenant. They have in a degree the same manifestations of a Saviour's love when they enter into their closets to commune with him; or when they go up to his courts to worship him; or when they surround the communion table in honor of his sacrifice; and while they know what it is sometimes to have the light of God's countenance intercepted, they also know what it is to have the joys of his salvation restored to them. Many of them may indeed have so much of imperfection and corruption remaining, that it may be a matter of great doubt whether they have ever received the lineaments of the divine image; and possibly even some of their fellow christians may feel painfully constrained to rank them with the world; but still they have the elements of a character which will certainly expand into the brightness of heavenly perfection. They have all been cast into the divine mould, and sooner or later the likeness to their Redeemer

will become so strong that it will be recognised in any part of the creation. Here again, who will not say that it is a most delightful reason for intercourse among the followers of Christ, that amidst all their varieties of condition, their character is substantially the same?

3. Christians are engaged in the same great *pursuits*.

As it respects themselves, the great end they have in view is to reach the fulness of the stature of perfect persons in Christ. They are laboring to subdue their internal corruptions ; to gain a more complete ascendency over the world ; to attain a more thorough conformity to the holy principles and precepts of the gospel. Instead of being satisfied with past attainments, it is their constant desire to grow in grace, and to press forward to the mark of the prize of the high calling of God. And as it respects others, their grand aim is to do them good ; and especially to aid their preparation for heaven. They see sinners perishing in multitudes on every side, and they know that what they see is but a drop measured against the ocean, compared with the mighty ruin which this great world presents ; and their hearts throb with anxious desire that this crowd of immortals may be turned out of the path to destruction. They open the Bible, and there contemplate the promises of God in respect to the final triumph of the great cause of redemption ; the assurance that the heathen shall be given to Christ for his inheritance, and the uttermost parts of the earth for a possession ; and here again their hearts kindle with earnest desires for the accomplishment of this great object. And there is not a christian on earth with whom these are not the commanding objects of pursuit ;—not one who does not, on the whole, seek with supreme desire the glory of

God in his own complete sanctification, as well as in the general advancement of the Redeemer's cause.

And while all christians are seeking substantially the same great ends, the means which they employ for the attainment of them are also the same. They all use the same weapons in their spiritual conflict; they take to themselves the armor of God, and put on the breast-plate of righteousness, and take hold of the sword of the Spirit, and protect themselves by the shield of faith; and thus equipped, they are sure to gain the victory. In their endeavors after a higher degree of sanctification, they rely ultimately on the same blessed truth, and on the same divine influence; well knowing that every effort which is made in their own strength will obstruct rather than aid their progress in holiness. And in the assaults which they make upon the empire of Satan, and in the efforts they put forth for the extension of Christ's kingdom, they are animated by a common impulse, and address themselves to their work in substantially the same manner. They labor with diligence and assiduity; but they rely especially on humble and importunate prayer; because this is the key to the store house of heaven; and they know that without God's blessing, their efforts to destroy the kingdom of darkness, and advance the kingdom of light, will be utterly unavailing.

And is it so that christians every where have their hearts set upon the same great objects, and are using substantially the same instrumentality for the attainment of them? Then, surely, there is a solid basis for christian intercourse. There is enough to bring them together, and bind them together, in sweet and sacred communion.

4. And christians have in prospect a common *inheritance*. As they are sharers together in the trials and conflicts of the present state, so they rejoice together in the anticipation of an exceeding and eternal weight of glory. Not one of them but expects, so long as he continues in the world, to find it a vale of tears ; and not one but is destined, as soon as he has passed out of it, to enter a region where all tears are wiped away. He sends his thoughts a little way forward, and the conflict with sin is still going on, and the burden of sorrow is pressing upon his heart ; but at a point not very distant, he perceives that that conflict has ceased, and that burden is removed, and the fields of immortality are opening upon the eye, and the praises of redemption are trembling on the ear, and the soul thrills with burning ecstacy amid the glories of its everlasting home. It is the privilege of every believer, let his circumstances here be as they may, to anticipate a throne, and a crown, and a harp of glory, and a union with seraphim and cherubim, the moment the hitherto imprisoned spirit has escaped from its earthly tabernacle ; and then, through all the ages of eternity, to be undergoing a perpetual transformation from glory to glory. And shall not they who have such hopes and prospects in common, who are severally waiting till their change come with the grateful expectation that they will mingle together in an eternal communion of joy—shall not they find reason enough for bearing each other's burdens, and being fellow helpers unto the kingdom of God ?

Christians, you surely cannot doubt that there is a foundation in the identity of your relations, your characters, your pursuits, and your prospects, for an habitu-

al intercourse with each other. Keep these various considerations then in your mind, and it cannot fail to render that intercourse at once profitable and delightful. Are you tempted at any time to indulge a spirit of coldness and suspicion towards any one who, whatever his infirmities may be, yet gives evidence of being a true disciple? Let that unhallowed feeling die under the thought that you are turning away from one who has been the subject of the same undeserved mercy, has been redeemed by the same blood, and born of the same Spirit, with yourself;—one who has the elements of the same character, is aiming at the same great objects, and with whom, a little while hence, you are to be associated in walking in the light of the Lamb, and singing the hallelujahs of heaven.



## CHAPTER III.

### HINDRANCES TO CHRISTIAN INTERCOURSE.

IN view of the important blessings that are secured by a free and faithful intercourse of christians with each other, it seems truly surprising that no greater degree of it exists ; and especially that many professors of religion, and those too who have intimate communion on almost every other subject, are utter strangers to each other in respect to the great concern of christian experience. It becomes therefore a matter of deep interest to investigate the causes of this evil ; for that it *is* an evil, and one of serious magnitude, must be apparent on the slightest reflection. More than almost any thing else, no doubt, it interferes with the christian's growth in grace, diminishes the general influence of his example, and prevents him from most effectually holding forth the word of life.

1. The first thing which I shall notice as an impediment to christian intercourse, is *a slavish adherence to the formalities of society*. Not that I would have this intercourse conducted on any other principles than those of genuine politeness ; but I would have much of the stateliness and parade which is too often witnessed in the higher circles, done away ; and I would have the code of etiquette, instead of being a system of mere frigid formalities, constructed with reference to the exercise of the understanding and the culture of the heart. In short I

would have the general intercourse of society, especially in the higher walks, less embarrassed by ceremony ; and would have persons of both sexes impressed with the conviction that the legitimate object of calls and visits is not answered by the exchange of a few unmeaning inquiries or compliments, but by the kindly interchange of practical thought and benevolent feeling.

It is easy to see that this feature to which I have referred in the organization of society, must stand much in the way of a suitable intercourse among the followers of Christ ; for so powerful is the influence of public opinion that, even where it is in acknowledged error, it is exceedingly difficult to move in the face of it. Professors of religion are often insensibly bound by its influence ; and forego the most favorable opportunities of serious and useful conversation, and of growth in knowledge and piety, because they have not courage to resist the current of worldly usages. This is true, to a great extent, even in respect to those who move in the same circles ; and it applies with still greater force to the intercourse between christians in the higher, and those in the humbler walks of life ; for while the former, by their stately and artificial habits, rather repel than invite a religious acquaintance with those below them, the latter, through fear of breaking over rules which they have never learned, and thus exposing themselves to unpleasant remark, are effectually deterred from any attempt or desire to mingle, even as christians, with those in more elevated circumstances.

I am far from wishing, as I shall show more at large in a subsequent chapter, to annihilate all distinctions in society ; for many of them I verily believe to have been

ordained by providence for wise and useful ends ; but while I would have the distinctions remain, I would have much of the artificial parade which attends them abolished. I would have far greater freedom than now prevails in the introduction of serious discourse ; and I would have the tie of christian brotherhood recognised, even though it should bind together the loftiest and the humblest individuals in the community. Let such a change as this take place, and the intercourse of christians would be in every respect more free and delightful, while every thing that is valuable in the forms and usages of cultivated society, might be retained.

Let me say a word in this connexion on the nature and foundation of true politeness. There is much even among christians that passes for this, which does not deserve the name ; and which, while it is utterly unworthy of the christian character, constitutes a serious obstacle to religious intercourse. But genuine politeness, while it is founded in christian principle, is a help, rather than a hindrance, to the free interchange of pious sentiment and feeling. It originates in a spirit of benevolence ;—a disposition to promote the happiness of our fellow creatures ; and wherever this spirit is acted out in social intercourse, *there* is the leading element of true politeness ; where it exists in connexion with a cultivated taste, *there* is the perfection of the quality. How obvious is it that many of the prevailing usages of society, instead of being dictated by a spirit of benevolence, are the effect of mere pride or selfishness ; and instead of contributing to the promotion of true happiness, serve to freeze up the affections and foster a habit of insincerity ! That it is the duty of christians to discourage this spurious politeness, admits

not of question ; but the more they cultivate that politeness which is based on christian principle, the more they cherish the benevolent spirit of the gospel in all their intercourse, and show that their whole conduct is controlled by the united influence of correct taste and christian feeling ; the more acceptably will they move in every circle of society, the more will they accomplish for the best interests of those with whom they mingle.

2. Another serious impediment to christian intercourse is found in *the use of a cant phraseology*. There is a set of phrases which have come extensively into use within a few years, in connexion with experimental religion, and especially with revivals of religion, which are exceedingly revolting to a correct and cultivated taste : and what increases the magnitude of the evil is, that the use of this offensive phraseology seems to be regarded by many as indicating a higher tone of spiritual feeling, and a greater degree of abstraction from the world, than the plain language of the bible and common sense. Indeed, if I do not greatly mistake, it is sometimes practically erected into a standard of christian character ; and the vigor and strength of a man's piety are often estimated by the degree of cant which pertains to his conversation. It were easy to show that, in many instances at least, there lurks under this phraseology, a spirit of self-righteousness and of self-deception ; and that serious and lasting evil results to the individual who uses it ; but the point which I would here urge is, that it is eminently adapted to check the spirit, and prevent the benefits, of religious intercourse. I remember to have heard a gentleman, distinguished alike by piety and intelligence, remark, that he had often been distressed that he could not enjoy the society of a certain

class of christians more ; but that they so completely deluged him with cant, that he longed when he was in their company, to breathe a different atmosphere ; and that he had often been led to inquire whether this revolting sensation which he found himself unable to control, did not indicate a low state of his own religious affections. I do not mean to intimate that the most cultivated christian may not hold the most delightful and profitable communion with a very uncultivated one : it is not the lack of intellectual culture to which I refer, but the introduction of technical phrases into the vocabulary of christian experience, which have the sanction neither of reason nor scripture, and which are adapted to lower the dignity of religion, and awaken low and grovelling associations.— And it is due to truth to say that, though this evil exists chiefly among the less enlightened classes, yet it is by no means confined to them : there are persons of no small degree of cultivation, who, from having long been conversant with this kind of phraseology in others, have actually come to adopt it, to a considerable extent, themselves ; and while their general conversation is exceedingly edifying, it is occasionally marred by some cant expression which has so often been repeated in their hearing that they have become insensible to its offensive character.

Now this is a matter in respect to which christians of all classes should be on their guard. There is certainly no ground for any controversy between piety and good taste ; and no one ever renders any service to the former by attempting to divorce it from the latter. Let the language of the bible and of common sense be adopted to give expression to the religious feelings of christians in their in-

tercourse with each other, and there will be no danger either of misapprehension or of disgust. But let the objectionable phraseology to which I have referred be employed, and while the idea communicated will often be vague and liable to misconception, a cultivated mind will not only receive no pleasant impression, but will be likely to turn away with positive dislike. It surely then becomes a duty to avoid the use of this kind of language ; for even admitting that it were indifferent in itself, yet if its tendency is to mar the enjoyment of a large class of christians, and to interfere with religious intercourse, it becomes an evil and ought studiously to be avoided.

3. Another hindrance to christian intercourse closely allied to the preceding is *a disposition, on the part of many christians, always to invest the subject of religion with gloom.* They are not only serious, as they should be, not only careful to guard against all unhallowed levity, and to manifest the utmost reverence whenever they speak of religion, but in addition to this, they display a kind of artificial sanctity, which seems to carry with it the aspect of cheerless despondency, or of cutting rebuke. In their conversation, they are disposed to dwell chiefly on the most gloomy and appalling subjects connected with religion ; and are much more inclined to notice and even magnify indications of evil, than to admit that there are any signs of good. They are exceedingly prone to talk of the coldness of their fellow christians ; and sometimes will make a brother an offender for a word ; and if, in some forgetful moment, a smile happens to play upon their countenances, they will afflict themselves for it, by admitting into their visage an additional hue of gloom. Sometimes this is to be traced to a derangement of the

bodily system ; sometimes to a morbid state of the mind induced by some cause which it is not easy to detect ; sometimes to a constitutionally gloomy temperament ; while, in other cases, it results from mistaken views of religious truth or experience ; and in others still, perhaps from a combination of several, or all, of these causes. But let the origin of it be whatever it may, its effect on christian intercourse is most undesirable. As there is nothing in religion that makes war upon taste, so there is nothing in it to chill the social affections, or prevent the natural operation of any of the faculties which God has given us, or cloud the countenance with an aspect of sullen melancholy. And though some individuals may mistake this for the operation of genuine piety, yet the mass of christians, no matter how devoted they may be, will cherish a different spirit, and will exhibit a different conduct ; and they will regard that to which I have just referred as an unnatural and unlovely exhibition of christian character, towards which they are incapable of being attracted. And the consequence will be that they will have little relish for the society of those in whom they witness it. Their cheerful views of religion, and the peace and joy which constitute leading elements in their own experience, will lead them to seek their associates among those who are not thus habitually under the influence of an austere or gloomy spirit.

I do not mean to intimate that the disposition to which I have here referred is a prevailing characteristic of christians in our day ; on the contrary, no doubt a much more common and alarming evil is found in the spirit of inconsideration and levity ; still the evil of which I have been speaking, has an existence, and in some circles

it exists greatly to the prejudice of the cause of religious intercourse. I would indeed earnestly exhort every professed christian, especially every one of an animated temperament, to take heed that the natural buoyancy of his spirits is always suitably chastened by the influence of devotional feeling ; but I would have every one guard against the opposite error, as he would avoid dressing up religion in such an attire that she would not be recognised even by her own friends.

4. *The prevalence of a sectarian spirit* is another bar to christian intercourse. Far be it from me to wish to interfere with the private arrangements, or to annihilate the distinctive existence, of any of those denominations which hold the fundamental truths of the gospel: I would say in the present state of the church, let them all exist ; and let each sit under its own vine and fig tree, enjoying its own freedom, and helping forward the cause of Christ in its own way. Still, where the same great principles are held by different sects, notwithstanding the varieties of opinion on minor points, there is a foundation for christian intercourse and co-operation. But who needs be told that there is a spirit of jealousy abroad in the church, which prevents the followers of Christ, to a great extent, from mingling with each other, unless they happen to have learned exactly the same shibboleth ? Because, for instance, one person believes that there are three orders of ministers in the church, and another that there is but one, while both agree in respect to the great truths which it is the duty of every minister to preach, it too often happens that these individuals are thrown as far asunder in respect to religious intercourse, as if they held in every respect opposite systems of faith. The slightest shades

of difference are not unfrequently magnified into an occasion of mutual shiness and suspicion ; and they who should recognise each other as brethren of the same family, and should co-operate for the promotion of the same great objects, scarcely know each other as the disciples of a common Master.

Let every christian see that he is free from the guilt of yielding to this unhallowed spirit. Maintain your own denominational peculiarities, if you will, but forget not the broad ground that you occupy in common with every disciple of Christ. Let the spirit of brotherly love breathe through your conduct towards all who hold the Head, though there may be some minor points in respect to which you may consider them in error. You expect hereafter to be joined with them in an eternal communion ; and wherefore should you stand aloof from them now, as if you desired there should be a perpetual separation ?

5. *The pressure of worldly engagements* constitutes another obstacle to christian intercourse. Let the secular employments of men be what they may, and in themselves as praiseworthy as they may, there is always danger that they will so engross their time, as to leave little for religious intercourse. How common is it for the student to become so absorbed in the pursuit of learning, for the merchant or mechanic to be so entirely occupied in his counting room or his workshop, for the lawyer to be so intent on the interests of his clients, or the statesman on the interests of the nation, that each gives himself but little leisure for communing with his fellow christians on the subject which, by his own acknowledgment, infinitely outweighs every other. And while this excess

of worldly engagements interferes with christian intercourse by occupying the time, it tends to the same result as it begets a spirit of worldliness ; for just in proportion as this spirit prevails, there will ordinarily be an aversion to religious conversation. It is out of the abundance of the heart that the mouth speaketh ; and if the heart be full of worldly affections, nothing better can be expected than that the world, in some form or other, will be the all engrossing topic of discourse.

If then you would not check the spirit of christian intercourse either in your own heart, or the hearts of your fellow christians, beware of the influence of the world. You have a right to be industrious in your worldly calling ; but you have no right to let your industry degenerate into a supreme devotion to the things which perish with the using. You have no right to let the cares of the world press upon you so far, as to interfere with your religious duties, or growth in grace. You have no right to let the spirit of the world come into your bosom, and awaken an aversion to the duty and the privilege of communing with your fellow disciples. Whenever you find that this unhappy effect is produced, you need no better evidence that the world has gained an undue influence over you.

6. *An unworthy timidity* on the part of many christians opposes a formidable barrier to religious intercourse. I know not how it is that, with many professors, there is more delicacy in speaking to each other on the subject of religion, and especially in regard to personal experience, than any topic that can be introduced. On every other subject indeed there may be the most unrestrained freedom ; when an allusion to this will create a sensation of

alarm. Hence it often happens that professors of religion are deterred from introducing religious conversation with their fellow professors, from the fear that they may be considered obtrusive ; and that they may not find a chord strung in the heart which will vibrate to so spiritual a subject as christian experience. And hence too, many a christian has remained in ignorance of the spiritual condition of his nearest friend, when every day has brought with it the best opportunities for an unreserved christian intercourse.

Professing christian, this timidity is unworthy of thy character, as a disciple of the Lord Jesus. It looks as though the spirit of a traitor may after all dwell in thy bosom. It looks as though thou wert ashamed of the Master by whose name thou art called. Whatever the origin of this feeling may be, it certainly is not from above ; and it ought to be crucified as a barrier both to thy comfort and usefulness.

7. The greatest hindrance to christian intercourse after all, is found in *a low state of piety*. There is here and there an individual who habitually cultivates close communion with God ; and who makes it manifest by his whole deportment that his treasure and his heart are in heaven ; and that this life with him is a constant course of preparation for a better. But with the great mass of professed christians, it must be acknowledged that the case is different : in many instances there is but little evidence of a spiritual mind, and the heart seems to be wedded to the pleasures, or the riches, or the honors, of the world, as closely as that of any professed worldling ; and in many other cases of which, on the whole, we are disposed to judge favorably, so far as re-

spects the *existence* of a principle of religion, there is yet a lamentable deficiency in regard to almost every thing that goes to constitute holy living. It is easy to see that such a state of things, so far and so long as it continues, must oppose an insurmountable obstacle to a free christian intercourse ; and such we find to be the fact. In a season of revival, when christians are awake to a sense of obligation, and their hearts are melted in compassion for sinners around them, and their graces are all quickened into lively exercise, how easy is it for them to unbosom themselves to each other in respect to spiritual concerns, in all the fulness of an affectionate confidence ; and how much are they disposed to blame themselves for the mutual reserve which they have practised on this subject in other days ! But let a season of prevailing coldness ensue, and let christians again suffer the spirit of piety to give place to the spirit of the world ; and the same backwardness to religious intercourse returns, and there is perhaps an unbroken silence of weeks or months in respect to the great concern, between those who had been accustomed to commune together with the utmost familiarity.

If then you would not only keep up a religious intercourse, but make it easy and delightful, let me urge you to live under the habitual influence of a spirit of piety. Accustom yourself much to serious and devout meditation, and keep your heart filled with pious affections, and live near to the throne of the heavenly grace ; and while you will never be at loss for a subject on which to converse with a christian friend, it will not be your fault, if the conversation is not both edifying and delightful.

Such, if I mistake not, are some of the principal obstacles to christian intercourse. Most of them exert an

insidious influence ; so that an individual may actually suffer serious evil in this respect, and yet, if he do not scrutinize closely, may not discover the cause. If, at any time, you have less relish for christian intercourse than you once had, inquire whether there is not a corresponding decline in all your religious affections ; and be not satisfied until you have discovered the cause of the evil, and have applied the appropriate remedy. Remember that just so far as you oppose an obstacle to religious intercourse as it respects others, you incur the blame of retarding their progress in piety ; and just so far as you yield to such an obstacle thrown in your own way, you run the hazard of contracting the guilt of a back-slader. Avoid, especially, the influence of bad example ; and whatever may be the reluctance of professing christians around you to commingle in religious conversation, recollect that you are not absolved from your obligation to fidelity ; and under such circumstances your duty manifestly is, to expostulate with them in respect to their delinquencies, and to labor in the way of affectionate admonition and rebuke to bring them to a better mind.



## CHAPTER IV.

### MODE OF CONDUCTING CHRISTIAN INTERCOURSE.

IT is obvious, on a moment's reflection, that christians may have much to do with each other, in the way of religious intercourse, and yet, from having wrong views in respect to it, or from being under the influence of improper feelings, the great end which should always be kept in view, may be but very imperfectly answered. Hence it becomes a matter of importance that every christian should have in his mind an outline of the course to be pursued, in order that the legitimate advantages of mingling with his fellow christians may be secured to him.

But as the intercourse of christians must necessarily be modified by the various relations they sustain to each other, and by the different circumstances in which they are placed, it is obvious that few general rules can be prescribed in regard to it. I shall only throw out a few brief hints on this topic, and leave each individual to apply them, as his own particular exigencies may demand.

1. Christian intercourse should be conducted with *frankness*. In nothing should there be the semblance of insincerity. As all true disciples are members of the same family, and have a community of interests, and duties, and trials, and prospects, they are bound always to re-

cognise this relationship, and to behave towards each other with the confidence it is fitted to inspire. They are indeed to have respect to considerations of christian prudence; but they are to take heed that the temporizing spirit of worldly policy does not creep in under this name, and entirely intercept the hallowed influences of religious intercourse. Christians certainly are not bound to confide every thing to their fellow christians indiscriminately; but if they consult either duty or interest, they will open their hearts to each other on all proper occasions, according to the circumstances in which they are brought together. If they are communing in relation to their particular trials or conflicts, the temptations which they have to encounter from without, or the corruptions that rise upon them from within, let them tell the story of their experience without hesitation and without reserve. Or if an individual has had rich experience of the grace and faithfulness of God in a season of affliction, or if the light of the divine countenance has been restored to him after a season of desertion, or if strength from on high has been communicated to him for the discharge of arduous duties, let him not hesitate, in the intimate communion of christian friendship, to tell what God has done for his soul. And then again, suppose the christian to be in communion with one who has become remiss in duty, or has brought a reproach upon his christian profession by a sinful conformity to the world, or even one who is only showing the first symptoms of spiritual decline, still he is bound, however painful may be the office, to deal honestly, and speak out his sober impressions in respect to the evil contemplated. Nothing short of this comes up to the spirit of his covenant engagements; no-

thing short of this is likely to bring in its train the blessing of God.

I would say then to every christian, in all your intercourse with your fellow christians, deal honestly. Honesty does not require that you should treat every professor of religion with the same degree of confidence ; for, of course, you are to have respect to peculiarities of character ; but it does require you not to distort or dissemble your real sentiments to any, and not to keep back any thing which a regard to your own conscience, or the spiritual interests of those with whom you associate, may demand that you should disclose. Such a course will ensure to you the greatest amount both of usefulness and comfort ; it will be at once a pledge of your own growth in grace, and a most important means of doing good to others.

2. Christian intercourse should be conducted in the spirit of *fraternal kindness*. As one important design of it is to cherish brotherly love, and render christians more watchful for the promotion of each others' happiness, so every thing connected with it should breathe the spirit of affectionate regard. There ought especially to be a mutual forbearance evinced towards each others infirmities, a mutual condescension in respect to unimportant differences of opinion, a mutual readiness to make sacrifices, if need be, for each others' spiritual welfare. But the occasion on which, more than almost any other, the utmost kindness is demanded, is that of giving or receiving a *fraternal admonition*. If you see your fellow christian deeply in fault, you cannot, for a moment, question that it is the duty of some one to admonish him ; and not improbably, if you take counsel of your conscience in view

of the circumstances of the case, you will find that this duty devolves upon yourself. But I hardly need say that it is an office of great delicacy ; and let it be performed as unexceptionably as it may, it probably will and ought to give pain ; but the good effect of it will depend very much on its being discharged in the exercise of kindness. You are to let your whole manner breathe a spirit of entire disinterestedness ; and to avoid every thing that has the semblance of censoriousness or uncharitable judging ; and to put the best construction on the foibles of the individual that you can ; and while you deal faithfully with his conscience, you are to endeavor to melt him into penitence as well by the tenderness of your manner as the impressive character of the considerations you urge upon him. But suppose, on the other hand, that you are the individual to receive the admonition—suppose you have become cold, and worldly, and neglectful of your religious duties, and some christian brother comes to you to discharge the unwelcome office of a reprobator—here again, you are sacredly bound to listen with respect and kindness, and to show him that you appreciate the motives which have brought him to you, and that you acknowledge the reasonableness of the errand on which he has come. And even if you are satisfied that he has misapprehended your feelings or conduct, and that your christian character has undeservedly fallen under suspicion, still you are to do justice to his impressions and motives ; and instead of repelling him by any expression of disgust or disapprobation, you are to encourage him by the benignity of your spirit to deal with you in all fidelity, if there should subsequently be occasion. Who does not know that serious altercations often arise between professed christians,

and sometimes extend their distracting influence over a whole church, which are occasioned simply by the lack of a spirit of kindness in administering or receiving a slight admonition? Let every professed disciple remember his responsibility in this matter; and as he values the comfort of his fellow christians, and the peace of the church, let him never even seem to yield to a spirit of unkindness.

3. Christian intercourse should be conducted with *dignity*. I have already borne testimony against the introduction of worldly formalities into the intercourse of the professed followers of Christ; but I would still have them, in all their mingling together, maintain the proper dignity of the christian character. Even if their intercourse be of the most private kind, and marked by the utmost confidence and freedom, still it should be governed by the principles of christian decorum; and nothing should occur which is unworthy of the noble relations which the christian sustains, and of the elevated views by which he professes to be controlled. And if this remark applies even to the most private interchange of sentiment and feeling among christians, with much greater force does it apply to those occasions on which they are associated in a more public manner; when the influence of what an individual does is felt at once through a large circle. In such circumstances, any departure from christian dignity becomes a serious evil; for while it gives pain, as the case may be, to many minds, it may probably fix some revolting association which will serve as an avenue to vain thoughts, when the christian would yield himself up to the most devout reflection.

I have known some persons who, in many ways, gave evidence of possessing much of the spirit of piety, whose religious habits, in some respects, approached so near to vulgarity, that it seemed questionable to many whether it was a privilege to associate with them. Not to dwell here upon the evil which I have already noticed—the abundant use of cant phraseology, there is a habit common to many, of illustrating religious topics by grovelling comparisons and almost vulgar anecdotes, which is utterly inconsistent with the dignity which should pertain to every thing connected with religion. I would exhort every christian, as he values his usefulness, to take heed that he avoid this error. Those, especially, who are constitutionally inclined to ludicrous associations, and who, previous to their conversion, have been much in the habit of trifling discourse, have great reason to be on their guard, lest the strength of natural inclination, or the force of established habit, should, before they are aware of it, lead them to make religion itself appear unlovely by exhibiting it in an unnatural and unworthy association.

4. Christian intercourse should be conducted in the spirit and exercise of *devotion*. A devotional frame ought indeed to be habitual with the christian; and just in proportion as he loses it, he loses the life, the evidences, and the comforts of piety. If he is in a great degree destitute of it, there is little probability that he will desire to commune with his fellow christians; or if he attemps it, it will be a frigid and formal matter from which no good will be likely to result. But let him be under the hallowed influence of a truly devotional spirit, and he will delight to associate with those of kindred feelings: let such a spirit breathe through a circle,

and it will hallow and elevate all their intercourse, and render them helpers of each others' joy.

And while christians, in mingling with each other, are to have their hearts richly imbued with devotional feeling, they are also to unite in devotional exercises. On this point there is, if I mistake not, a sad delinquency in respect to the great mass of professors: even though they may converse together freely on the general interests of religion, and on subjects connected with christian experience, yet it is comparatively a rare thing that they unitedly supplicate the blessing of God to attend the conversation in which they are engaged; and hence, not improbably, their intercourse is alike barren of edification and comfort. In opposition to this, it were desirable, where only two or three of the followers of Christ meet together for christian communion, that there should be at least one prayer offered with reference either to their own general interests as christians, to the cause of Christ in the world around them, or to the specific object (if there be one) which may have brought them together. Or if they have assembled in larger numbers, whether for religious conversation of a more general or more particular kind, whether with immediate reference to their own spiritual improvement, or the advancement of Christ's cause in the world; let them not separate, till they have commended themselves, and the object which has convened them, to the smiles and blessing of God. And this, more than almost any thing else, renders the hours of christian intercourse delightful in the retrospect: if we can feel that God has been acknowledged, and his favor implored, we may hope with good reason that our communion has not been in vain.

While then, Christian, you highly appreciate the privilege of associating with your fellow christians, as you have opportunity, see to it that the benefits of your intercourse are not lost by its being conducted in an improper manner. Keep in view the outline which has here been presented, or form for yourself some better one, to aid you in respect to this part of your conduct. And the result will certainly be that your fidelity will be crowned with rich blessings: blessings to your own soul; blessings to those with whom you associate.

## CHAPTER V.

### OCCASIONS OF CHRISTIAN INTERCOURSE.

The general condition of the christian's life, and the relations he sustains to the church and the world, may be considered as always furnishing occasion for a free and affectionate intercourse among the professors of christianity. But the particular occasions for it will, of course, grow out of the circumstances or relations of the church as a body, or of some community of christians, or out of the peculiar condition of individual members. I cannot here do any thing more than refer to some of the more general occasions, on which a free interchange of sentiment among christians is peculiarly desirable.—I shall consider them as of a more private, or a more public nature; as they respect individuals, or communities.

Of the more PRIVATE occasions for religious intercourse, I may mention,

1. The case of *a christian in a state of spiritual apathy*. It is a melancholy fact that there are few christians, who do not, at some period or other, fall into this state; while, with many who bear the christian name, it would seem to be the prevailing habit of their lives. This state of things imposes upon every professor the duty of communicating with his fellow professors, either with a view to

rebuke their spiritual sluggishness, or to get rid of his own.

Suppose you are yourself a wanderer from God, and are conscious that you have obscured your evidences, and forfeited your comforts, by a course of backsliding—I know that, in such a case, you will, in all probability, be tempted to stand aloof from your christian friends, through fear of the rebuke which you know you deserve ; but most clearly your duty and interest both require that you should throw yourself in their way, and even court the fraternal admonition. You are in a condition in which you will be likely to wander farther and farther until you are reclaimed ; and so long as you turn your back on God's people, you betray a disposition which strongly indicates that you will never be reclaimed. If a christian brother approaches you, therefore, with a view to arouse your slumbering conscience, remember that he comes to do you good ; and endeavor to profit to the utmost by his monitory counsels. And if no christian brother comes to you, let a sense of your condition, and of your needs, carry you to some pious friend, who may advise you with christian fidelity, and commend you to the reclaiming grace of God.

Or, suppose, in the circle in which you move, you discover in some professing christian sad indications of spiritual declension ; and when you count the cost of his unedifying conversation to the cause of Christ, your heart sinks within you—here again is an occasion for christian intercourse which you must not overlook. In all probability, if you go to him with the right spirit, and do not prematurely relax your efforts for his recovery, you may be the instrument of reclaiming him from his

wanderings. Listen not to the evil suggestion that it is an unpleasant duty, and belongs to many others as truly as to yourself; but in the strength of divine grace, resolve that you will go and open your heart to him with the confidence of a brother; and it is most likely that you will see him melted down under your faithfulness, and ultimately recovered from his backsliding. I am aware that these are some of the most painful occasions of religious intercourse that ever occur; and hence, perhaps, they are more frequently neglected than any other; but let any professor of religion take counsel of his conscience, or supplicate divine guidance in reference to this matter, or even give himself up to the dictates of kindness and compassion, and he will find it difficult to pass by a wandering brother, without faithfully discharging this duty.

2. The case of the *desponding christian* presents another occasion for religious intercourse. In his adorable sovereignty, God is sometimes pleased to leave his children to mourn in darkness, without any comfortable evidence of his favor. The immediate causes of this desertion are various; but in many cases at least, no doubt it is to be traced to some signal neglect of duty. In some instances this withdrawalment of the light of the divine countenance is partial; in others it is entire, insomuch that the soul sits and mourns amid the chilling shades of despair. And this is a calamity which, wherever it exists, calls loudly for christian sympathy and counsel.—Have you a christian friend in this condition; one who, in other days, has participated with you in the hopes and joys of religion, but has now seen all his joys and hopes withered, and is writing bitter things against himself, when

you fully believe that his name is in the book of life? Commune with that friend with the freedom which brotherly love inspires; and hold up to his view the precious promises of God to his people; and endeavor to bring him again to the living fountain of comfort. Or if you are yourself sinking under a similar burden, and beginning to doubt whether religion has ever exerted its influence upon your heart, here again, reveal your apprehensions and trials to some judicious friend, who, by his counsels and instructions, may contribute to lead you back into the light of the divine favor. A christian who begins to despond, is exceedingly liable to misapprehend divine truth in its application to himself; and just in proportion as his vision of spiritual objects becomes disordered, they will appear clothed with a hue which does not belong to them. In an early stage of this diseased state of the mind, a single suggestion judiciously made, may, by the blessing of God, give the thoughts a different direction, and destroy the predisposition to a melancholy habit; whereas, without any such seasonable interposition, the cloud which, at first, hangs lightly upon his spirits, may grow thicker and darker, until he is buried in the very depths of spiritual gloom.

3. Another occasion for religious intercourse is presented by the case of the *tempted christian*. I am aware indeed that the desponding christian is often subject to great temptations; for the adversary, who delights to afflict God's people, is almost sure to avail himself of such an opportunity for casting his fiery darts into the soul: but I refer here rather to the temptations which overtake the christian in the ordinary concerns of life, and which grow out of the peculiar circumstances in which Providence

places him. He may be tempted to indulge a spirit of worldliness, or a spirit of levity ; to forget the obligations of justice or charity ; to form plans for his own temporal aggrandizement at the expense of his spiritual interests—and he may, or may not, be sensible that he is thus tempted ; but if *you* discover it, you are bound to admonish him of his danger, and to counsel him to keep a double guard at the particular point where he is most likely to yield ; and to do your utmost to arm him for a successful conflict. Or if you are the tempted christian, and a brother comes to you with a friendly admonition upon his lips, do not fail to welcome him on his errand of love ; and open your ear to his kindly suggestions ; and if the thought occurs to you that he has mistaken your case, and you are in no danger, call to mind the inspired declaration—"Let him that thinketh he standeth, take heed lest he fall." To say nothing here of the great adversary, the world itself is a mere "show box of temptation ;" and as christians would avoid falling under its power, it becomes them mutually to aid each other in resisting its influence.

4. The case of *the christian struggling with worldly calamity*, presents yet another occasion for religious intercourse. The sorrows of life—oh, who can hope to escape them ? The christian surely cannot ; for they meet him every where, and sometimes cluster upon his heart with a most exhausting pressure. And then how much he needs the kindly influence of christian sympathy, and the aid of christian counsel, that he may bear his afflictions with fortitude, and improve them to his sanctification ! You have some friend or acquaintance who lies languishing on a sick bed ; or perhaps hourly expecting

the death of some beloved relative ; or it may be just returned from the grave in which have been buried his best earthly hopes—Hasten to that sick chamber, or to that bed of death, or to that scene of affliction, both as a comforter and counsellor ; and if you are faithful, you may expect that that bleeding heart will revive, and rejoice, and bless God, and exercise stronger confidence in his government, and more entire submission to his will, because you have gone thither on that benevolent errand. And when you are yourself in turn called to smart under the rod of God, how highly will you esteem the privilege of being met in the midst of your sorrows by the kind hand of christian friendship, and led away into the green pastures and by the still waters ! And if you are able to receive the visitation with joy, as having contributed to sunder some chords by which you were improperly bound to the world, and thus to advance your preparation for heaven, no doubt one reason will be that you had christian friends around you, who contributed by their pious and seasonable conversation to secure the legitimate influence of your trials upon your heart and life.

But there are occasions for religious intercourse of a more **PUBLIC** nature : such for instance,

1. *As the approach of the commemoration of the death of Christ in the supper.* This ordinance is, to a great extent, social in its nature ; for it is the design of it, as well to unite the followers of Christ more closely, as to bring them all nearer to their common Lord. And as the celebration of the ordinance is a social service, so, in some measure at least, should be the preparation for it. Christians, in the anticipation of this privilege, should meet to converse freely on topics immediately connected with per-

sonal experience ; to aid each other in the work of self-examination ; to get their hearts more deeply imbued with the love of Christ ; to endeavor to awaken in each other a spirit of hearty mourning for all their delinquencies ; and to gain, by familiar conference and united prayer, a more vivid impression of the nature and design of the solemnity which they are approaching, as well as of the qualifications for an acceptable attendance upon it. No doubt it is for the want of more distinct preparation for this ordinance, that it so often proves barren of light, and strength, and comfort ; and if it were to occupy more of the christian's thoughts in anticipation, and especially if he were to have more intercourse with his fellow christians in reference to it, there is every reason to believe that each successive celebration would sensibly contribute to purify and elevate his graces, and would constitute an era in his religious improvement.

2. *A general state of religious indifference in a church, and of consequent lethargy in the surrounding world*, furnishes another pressing occasion for christian intercourse. That such a state of things is lamentable in the extreme, and that something ought to be done, to produce a change for the better, surely no disciple of Christ can hesitate to acknowledge. Is it not obvious then, that christians are, first of all, to endeavor to awake each other out of sleep ? And how shall this be done but by mutual admonition and expostulation, and united prayer ? Here is manifestly a call for christian intercourse, as urgent as the salvation of the soul is important ; and he who declines to listen to it, and goes on his way without suffering himself to be disturbed by the threatening ruin of the multitude around him, has great reason to fear, whatever

his professions may be, lest his name should be found at last on the list of the impenitent and reprobate. Be it that you belong to a church, the great mass of whose members seem to be given up, in a melancholy degree, to spiritual insensibility—what is the duty which this state of things devolves upon you? Most certainly, not only to awake to greater activity yourself, but to do your utmost to rouse your fellow professors, and enlist them in a new and vigorous course of effort for the salvation of immortal souls. It is a great point gained, if christians, in such circumstances, can be brought together for conversation and prayer; for though there may be only a few hearts, or as the case may be, but a single heart, that is deeply impressed with the momentous interests to be secured, yet this spirit of anxiety may extend through the influence of sympathy from one heart to another, till all are beating under a common impulse, and breathing forth a common prayer for the revival of God's work. Let no christian be discouraged in such a case, even if he should find himself absolutely alone; let him mingle with christians around him with the right spirit, and he has good reason to hope that these humble efforts, made in the strength of almighty grace, will draw after them a rich blessing.

3. *A revival of religion* presents another occasion for christian intercourse which should be most diligently improved. It is true that, in every revival, the great Agent is God; and unless he is pleased to work by his sovereign and new creating power, nothing will be accomplished. Nevertheless, it is not to be forgotten that he works through the instrumentality of his people; and he has, in an important sense, committed his work to their

hands. Suppose then that his Spirit is actually begun to be poured out, and there are indications on the right hand and on the left, that a special work of divine grace has commenced ;—here is a demand for frequent and faithful intercourse among the disciples of Christ, which must be met, if they will not incur the responsibility of preventing one of the most merciful of all God's visitations.—They have much to do to keep each other mindful of their dependance, to quicken each other to a higher sense of the value of the soul, and of the danger of its being lost, and of their own obligation, especially in view of the proffered agency of God, to labor for its salvation. They are to mingle their counsels and prayers with reference to ascertaining the best means of promoting the work ; and are to guard each other against errors, especially such as are incident to an excited state of feeling. They are to report the success of their private labors—every thing which may have come within their knowledge, that is fitted either to strengthen their hopes, or awaken their apprehensions. In short, they are to act habitually under the impression that the extent of the revival may, and probably will, depend, in no small degree, under God, on the character and degree of christian intercourse that is maintained ; that, while their fidelity in this respect may greatly prolong, their neglect of duty may proportionally abridge, the period, in which the gracious influences of the Spirit will be signally poured out.

I would have every christian who labors in a revival, often recur to the fact that he is but an unworthy instrument in the hands of Sovereign Omnipotence ; that, while it is his province to use the means, it is God's to give them the effect : but I would still have him labor, and

urge his fellow christians to labor, as vigorously, as if the great end were to be accomplished by their own independent efforts. Christian intercourse under such circumstances, properly conducted, will lead to this result. It will at once increase the spirit of prayer and the spirit of action ; will make men labor diligently for the salvation of souls, and keep them impressed with their own impotence to accomplish the end, and their unworthiness of the blessing by which it is to be accomplished. This is the true spirit of a revival ; the only spirit which conveys a pledge of its continuance.

Other occasions of christian intercourse might be noticed, particularly those which are connected with the great benevolent objects of the day ; but it is not needful to dwell upon them in this connexion. In view of these various occasions, some or other of which are constantly occurring, let every professor inquire concerning the measure of his own fidelity. And if the inquiry should result in a feeling of shame and guilt, let him be humble for the past, and faithful in the future.

## CHAPTER VI.

### OPPORTUNITIES FOR CHRISTIAN INTERCOURSE.

THERE are few professed christians, who will not readily acknowledge that it is at once the duty and the privilege of the disciples of Christ to maintain a free and frequent intercourse with each other, in respect to the great objects and interests of religion. But in a multitude of instances, this acknowledgment has scarcely fallen from the lips, before there is an apology offered for personal delinquency, on the ground that there is a lack of opportunity for such intercourse. The distracting influence of worldly care, and perhaps the necessity of providing for a family, are urged as reasons why this acknowledged duty cannot be performed ; and thus the things that are seen and are temporal, are virtually allowed the precedence above the things that are unseen and eternal.

Most christians, I have no doubt, will find, upon reflection, that they have practically yielded, more or less, to the influence of this error ; that they have apologized to their consciences for the neglect of religious intercourse, on the ground that it must subject them to great inconvenience, and, in many instances, has seemed well nigh impracticable. To all professors of religion, and especially to that large class to which I have just referred, I would suggest the following considerations.

*1. Endeavor to form a high practical estimate of the obligation and the benefits of christian intercourse.* It is manifest that the degree of interest which men feel in any particular object, will determine the amount of effort which they will employ for the attainment of it. If the object appears to them of but little moment, and their obligation to labor for it seems of a doubtful character, their exertions in respect to it will probably be feeble and inefficient, unless indeed they are contented to let it entirely alone. On the other hand, let them feel that the object proposed is one of commanding importance, and that they are bound by the strongest considerations of duty and interest to put forth their most vigorous efforts for its accomplishment, and the effect will be that they will be vigilant for opportunities to help it forward, and will render many things subservient to it, which, under other circumstances, might have entirely escaped observation. Observe the man whose ruling passion is the love of honor, or the love of wealth, or the love of pleasure, and in each case you will perceive how watchful he is for opportunities to advance the particular object to which he is devoted, and how successful he is in finding them ; thus illustrating the inspired declaration that “ the children of this world are wiser in their generation than the children of light.”

Apply this to the case under consideration. If you accustom yourself habitually to realize that the maintenance of religious intercourse is at once the christian’s precious privilege and imperious duty, and that you cannot neglect it, but at the hazard of bringing leanness into your soul, it will keep you constantly watchful for opportunities of communing with your fellow christians ;

and the result will be that such opportunities will occur to you in the experience of every day. But if you do not properly appreciate the value of this intercourse, if you regard it as a matter to be attended to, or neglected, just as worldly convenience may dictate, then indeed the consequence will probably be that you will not attend to it at all ; that weeks, and months, and years, will roll away, and you will scarcely be sensible that any opportunity has occurred for communion with your fellow christians on the things that belong to your everlasting peace.

I say again, then, form a high estimate of the importance of this duty, of the value of this privilege. Remember that it is one of the blessings involved in the purchase made on Calvary. Remember that the neglect of it will prove the certain harbinger of your decline in the graces, the comforts, the evidences, of piety. Remember that the disposition to neglect it would render it fearfully probable that you had not that spirit which is the essential requisite for mingling in the communion of saints in light. Dwell much upon it in your meditations ; and let it become an object of ardent desire ; and I greatly mistake if you do not find the opportunities for christian intercourse far more frequent than you had ever imagined.

*2. In the general economy of life, make distinct provision for christian intercourse.* Let it be settled in your mind that this is a matter to be attended to as truly as the duty of private devotion, or public worship, or making provision for the wants of your family. Do not leave it at loose ends ; but so far as you can, let it be regulated by system. It were well for a few friends to meet sta-

tedly for purposes of christian conversation ; and where they are prevented from doing this, let them still meet frequently by occasional appointment. Such meetings, more than almost any other, have been found to refresh the christian's spirit, and arm him with new resolution for the various duties, and trials, and conflicts, of the religious life.

We are never likely to gain any object for which we do not distinctly provide in our calculations and arrangements. A general intention of laboring for it as opportunity may occur, and convenience dictate, will be almost sure to result in nothing ; and it is precisely on this ground, as we have reason to believe, that the great mass of men are losing their souls. When we see a man with a definite object in his eye, forming distinct plans for the attainment of it, and moving forward in the execution of those plans, we expect that he will do something to purpose ; and we look with confidence for a result proportioned to his efforts. He is in an attitude now to encounter obstacles ; and to crucify a spirit of apathy in its earliest operations ; and to bring to his aid other subordinate agencies, as opportunity may permit, or occasion require. He avoids on the one hand, the evil of those who work without a plan ; and on the other, of those who form a plan, and do nothing towards its execution. Precisely the same principle you must adopt, and the same course you must pursue, if you would find opportunities for christian intercourse. You must make provision for such opportunities by incorporating them into the whole plan of your life ; and you must not merely make provision for them, but must faithfully avail yourself of them when they occur ; and the more you do this, the more of

practical system you have in this department of religious duty, the more will you value the privilege of this intercourse, the more fruitful in permanent blessings will it be to you.

3. *Take advantage of every opportunity for christian conversation that occurs in your ordinary intercourse.* No man can determine in what circumstances he may be placed the next day, or even the next hour. In the prosecution of our worldly plans, we may be unexpectedly carried from one place to another, may form acquaintances which we never anticipated, and meet our christian friends, for a longer or shorter period, in circumstances the most favorable to religious intercourse. For instance, you meet a christian brother but for a few moments in the common business of life ; but however short the period, you may drop some word that shall serve to quicken his good affections ; or he may suggest some hint to you that shall be the means of leading you into some more extended field of benevolent action. Or else you may be thrown into christian society while you are on a journey ; and by introducing serious conversation in a proper manner, you may secure to yourself the blessing of having reclaimed some brother who had begun to wander ; or of having assisted some one in his conflict with temptation ; or of having shed light upon some mind that was perplexed in respect to duty ; or of having given a sacred impulse to some heart, which shall be communicated to another and another, until religion is perceptibly revived through an extensive community. Wherever you are then, watch for opportunities for this casual kind of intercourse with your fellow christians. The amount

of good that you may gain, and that you may accomplish, by this means, is incalculable.

There are two extremes in relation to this part of your duty, against each of which you should be on your guard. One is the error of supposing that you are to introduce religious conversation on all occasions, even with professed christians, without respect to circumstances. Where persons of this description only are together, it ought certainly to be taken for granted that religious discourse may be safely and acceptably introduced ; though even in this case, the peculiar character and circumstances of the individuals with whom you converse, ought to be taken into the account, in determining what particular direction the conversation shall receive. But where professors of religion happen to be casually thrown into the company of worldly and wicked men, though this is by no means to be admitted as a sufficient reason in all cases, or even in ordinary cases, for their not communing together on the most important of all concerns, yet it no doubt does sometimes justify them in keeping silence ; and if they were to attempt serious conversation, it would be nothing better than casting their pearls before swine. I have known instances in which professors in a public conveyance, and in a promiscuous company, have urged religious conversation manifestly to the injury of the cause they have wished to benefit ; and their imprudent zeal has still carried them forward in a manner the most earnest and determined, while they were drawing insults upon themselves from every side, and what was worse, bitter reproaches on their holy religion.

The other extreme is that of a false and apprehensive delicacy ; an excessive fear of wounding even a fellow

professor by placing him under a kind of necessity to join in religious conversation ; and much more of giving offence to men of the world, if the conversation happens to be in their presence. With respect to giving pain to any professed christian by introducing a religious topic—I would say that, if he is susceptible of pain from such a cause, the sooner he feels it the better ; for no more unequivocal evidence can be needed that, if he has ever felt the power of religion, it has greatly lost its influence over him. The fact that an individual has confessed Christ before the world, and thus assumed the badge of discipleship, is a sufficient warrant, so far as he is concerned, for addressing him on the subject of religion in any suitable circumstances. And even in respect to giving offence to worldly men who may be present, if the conversation is properly conducted, there is little ground for apprehension. In far the greater number of instances, no objection will be offered ; and in very many, there will be marked attention and approbation. I remember to have known two professors of religion in a stage coach carry on a protracted conversation simply with a view to the benefit of a fellow traveller, whom they did not think proper to approach in a more direct way ; and the result was, that there was good reason to hope that the truth was permanently lodged, not only in his understanding, but in his heart. No doubt while professed christians are often deterred by considerations of delicacy from conversing on religious subjects in the presence of worldly men, they are exciting the surprise of those very individuals, that there is nothing in their conversation to indicate either the profession or the spirit of piety.

The good effects that would result from an adherence to this general rule would be manifest in various ways. Especially, it would be a means of redeeming time. Who needs be told that a large part of the conversation of professing christians, in their casual interviews, is not only of a mere worldly character, but is often fitted to dissipate serious thought, and lower the tone of spiritual feeling? And surely this involves a criminal perversion of time. Let the habit once be formed of turning these opportunities for intercourse, in some degree, to a religious account, and not only is the evil of which I have spoken avoided, but great good is secured. And the precious moments which God has given us, for useful purposes, are redeemed from waste, and consecrated to the ends for which he gave them.

Another happy effect of this would be a habit of noticing and reflecting upon the dispensations of Providence. Let christians, in the occasional intercourse they have from day to day, accustom themselves to serious discourse, and not a small part of the topics which will present themselves will be drawn from the events which occur around them ; and these events being connected with serious reflections, will lead them to recognise God in every thing. Such a habit will serve to associate the recollection of his agency with a thousand events which the natural atheism of the heart practically ascribes to chance ; and thus it will elevate their views of the providence of God, while its more remote influence will be to strengthen their confidence and hope in him, who watches the fall of a sparrow, and numbers the hairs of our heads.

Are you still ready to complain, Christian, of the want of opportunities for intercourse with your fellow chris-

tians? Be assured, the fault is in yourself. You do not realize the value of the privilege, so as to keep yourself intent upon securing it; or you do not provide for such opportunities in your general arrangements; or you do not avail yourself of them as they occur in the experience of every day. Opportunities enough are offered you in the arrangements of divine providence; and if you will not improve them, can you hesitate as to the question, where rests the responsibility?



## CHAPTER VII.

### CHRISTIAN INTERCOURSE IN THE FAMILY.\*

I have already had occasion to advert to the fact that, considering the great ends to be accomplished by christian intercourse, it is truly matter of surprise that there should be such a lamentable neglect of it. This remark, if I mistake not, applies, with peculiar force, to a large proportion of christian families. It is no uncommon thing to find a family, the majority of whose members are professedly the disciples of Christ, and who sit together regularly at the communion table, who are nevertheless entirely ignorant of each others' religious feelings, except as they are exhibited in the ordinary course of conduct.—There are two considerations which evince the unreasonableness of this, while they illustrate the peculiar obligation of every family in which there are professors of religion to pursue an opposite course.

The first is, that *christians, in the circumstances here supposed, sustain to each other the most endearing relations, independently of the tie which binds them together as the disciples of a common Master.* It seems to have been one great design of Providence in instituting families, to

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\* See this subject treated in a most interesting manner in "The Family Monitor," by Rev. J. A. James; whose works are too well known, and too highly appreciated, in this country, to need recommendation.

increase the amount of human happiness, by giving the members of each family a peculiar interest in each other, and thus disposing them to co-operate for mutual benefit. How obvious is it, for instance, that the *parental* relation is designed to be the channel of incalculable blessing ; that it has been constituted with all its unutterable tenderness, with a view to secure a suitable provision for the education of children ! Indeed it is a fact every where recognised, that members of the same family ought to be peculiarly interested in each others' welfare, and have special claims upon each others' kindness ; and hence there is scarcely any thing from which we revolt more instinctively than domestic discord. It is painful to hear of contentions in neighborhoods, or in any of the departments of society ; but for parents and children, brothers and sisters, to array themselves against each other, is such an affront to nature, and indicates such moral hardihood, that a mind of common sensibility can scarcely contemplate it without shuddering.

If then, it be universally admitted that members of the same family are under peculiar obligations to strive for the promotion of each others' happiness, here is a powerful reason why professors of religion in the same domestic circle should have much to do with each other in the way of christian intercourse ; for while the subject to which their attention would thereby be directed, is the most important of all subjects, there is no other means of mutual benefit which could be employed with equal advantage. Do you desire no better reason why you should labor for the support and education of that child, than that you are his father ? Say whether this is not an equally good reason why you should commune with him

as a professed disciple of Christ, and endeavor, by frequent counsels and admonitions, to fortify him for the conflicts, and encourage him to the duties, of the christian life? You have no difficulty in determining that the fact that an individual who needs to be relieved from want, or to be advised in difficulty, is your brother, carries with it a peculiar obligation to you, to open your hand in charity, or your lips in counsel—why then is not the obligation equally imperative, in view of the same fact, to commune with him as a *christian* brother, when you see that he has spiritual exigencies which it may be in your power to meet, and thus save him perhaps from being the sport of temptation, or from rushing into the most serious evils?

The other consideration which evinces the peculiar obligation of christian intercourse in the family, while it is a rebuke to that almost unbroken reserve which too commonly prevails, is, that *in no other situation are there so many advantages for this intercourse.* The individuals concerned, from living under the same roof, and seeing each other every day, and in almost every variety of circumstances, have an opportunity of becoming thoroughly acquainted with each others' characters ; of knowing each others' infirmities, and temptations, and dangers, better than in any other condition in which they could be placed. And as the endearing relation they bear to one another would seem to justify a greater measure of freedom in their intercourse than they could otherwise indulge, so their constant commingling together must furnish opportunities for religious conversation, of the most favorable kind. Whether the intercourse be between two individuals only, or a larger number ; whether it be of a par-

ticular or general nature ;—supposing several members of the family, and especially the heads of it, to be professed christians, there is every advantage for it that could reasonably be desired. The neglect of it, under such circumstances, is, therefore, peculiarly inexcusable.

Christian intercourse in the family should exist indiscriminately among all the members who are the professed followers of Christ ; though it will of course be modified, to some extent, by the relations they bear to each other. I will consider this duty briefly as it relates to husbands and wives, parents and children, brothers and sisters, servants and other members of the family.

1. There should be the most unreserved christian intercourse between *the husband and wife*. As the relation that exists between them legitimately involves the strongest mutual affection, so it *ought* to involve an unlimited mutual confidence in respect to every thing connected with their spiritual prosperity. Whatever religious doubts or anxieties either of them may have, to whatever temptations either of them may be subject, there should be the most unreserved freedom in mutually communicating every feeling, and sharing every sorrow. And I hardly need say that they should, both steadily and occasionally, mingle their thanksgivings and supplications at the throne of grace ; endeavoring to call down blessings upon each other, to quicken one another in the spiritual life, and to cherish in each others' breasts every pious and devout affection. And while they should keep in view, in their intercourse, their own mutual growth in grace, they should constantly have respect to the spiritual interests of their families ; devising plans by which their children, and those under their care, may be

likely to be brought under the influence of religion, or assisted in the religious life ; and seeking divine grace to enable them properly to understand, and faithfully to discharge, their parental duties. If the heads of a family are not sufficiently interested for the moral and religious improvement of those whom Providence has committed to their guardianship, to commune together in respect to the means of doing them good, there is little to hope from any efforts which they will be likely to put forth in the way of christian education.

2. Between *parents and children* also, there should be frequent and intimate christian intercourse. Where persons in the morning of life make a profession of religion, there is a degree of responsibility devolved on their christian parents, which it is not easy adequately to estimate. It depends, under God, more, perhaps, on their influence, than any other, whether their children form a consistent and elevated christian character, and honor their profession by an exemplary and useful life, or whether they relapse into habits of inconsideration and folly, and bring a reproach upon the cause of Christ by a miserable course of conformity to the world. Let a christian parent, in these circumstances, appear to concern himself little about the spiritual interests of his children, and never introduce serious conversation with them, or manifest any desire to help them forward in the religious life, and they will not unnaturally come to imagine that what he treats with so much indifference is really less important than they had supposed ; and, as a consequence, will gradually relax their watchfulness, and become remiss in every duty that involves self-denial. But, on the other hand, let a parent, in these circumstances, mingle with his children, in that

affectionate intimacy which will naturally result from a union of parental tenderness and ardent piety ; let him keep himself acquainted with the difficulties they have to encounter, the temptations to which they are exposed, and all their progress in the religious life ; let him address them freely and frequently in the way of encouragement, or admonition, as their circumstances may require, and he has good reason to expect that he will see them consistent and active christians, adorning the doctrine of God their Saviour, by a holy life and conversation. It is a painful fact in the experience of the church that a considerable proportion of persons who make a profession of religion in youth, seem, after a little time, to lose the comforts and evidences of piety, by becoming criminally conformed to the world. Many of these persons, it is true, are the children of parents, who are themselves either indifferent to religion, or openly irreligious ; and of course it were not to be expected that *they* should contribute, in any way, to form the christian character of their children ; but where this spirit of backsliding is manifested in those whose parents are professedly the followers of Christ, no doubt the evil is to be traced, in many instances, chiefly to parental neglect.

But suppose the children of a family to have advanced beyond the first stage of the christian life, and to have become established, in some good measure, in the way of truth and holiness ;—though there may not be the same urgent demand for parental vigilance and counsel as in the case just supposed, yet there is good reason why it should still be continued ; and independently of the exigency of the case, a free christian intercourse should be kept up, with reference to mutual religious improvement. While

the tenderness and dignity of the parental relation is fitted to open a passage to the heart of a child for whatever comes from a father's or a mother's lips, in the way of christian counsel or instruction, there is that in the filial relation which makes the parent's heart thrill with unutterable emotions, when he hears from the lips of his child the story of his experience of the preciousness of the gospel, and the covenant faithfulness of God.

3. The same affectionate intercourse should exist between *brothers and sisters*. It often happens that, as they have enjoyed substantially the same religious privileges both in the family and out of it, so they become impressed with the importance of religion, and are hopefully the subjects of a spiritual renovation, and enter the visible church, at nearly the same time ; so that they must needs feel a peculiar interest in each others' spiritual welfare, growing out of the fact that they have been so intimately associated in the beginning of their christian experience. How reasonable that, under such circumstances especially, they should cast off all reserve, and become fellow-helpers unto the kingdom of God, by the most confidential religious intercourse ; by doing their utmost in the way of mutual counsel and exhortation, and if need be, reproof, to carry each other forward in the path to heaven !

But while they are bound to assist each other, so far as they can, in respect to the whole matter of christian experience, they are also mutually to aid each others' improvement in religious knowledge. Let them study the bible together, interrogating each other in respect to the meaning of its contents, and settling every question that is raised from an intelligent and thorough examination of the passage to which it relates, and by a reference to the

best authorities within their reach. Such a course pursued from month to month, and year to year, would not only contribute to strengthen the cord which binds them together as the disciples of Christ, but would secure to them a vast amount of biblical knowledge, and ultimately make them "mighty in the scriptures."

4. There should be religious intercourse between *pious servants and other christian members of the family*. Perhaps your domestics, while they give evidence of piety and make a profession of it, are yet ignorant, and need instruction in respect to the great truths and duties of religion—whether you are the head of a family, or whether you are a son, or a daughter, or only an inmate, here is a demand upon you to endeavor to impart a more extensive and intimate knowledge of God's word. Or perhaps you may discover in them a spirit of excessive worldliness, or a disposition to treat lightly their christian obligations, or even some overt act of folly or sin—let your place in the family be what it may, you are bound, in this case, affectionately, yet faithfully, to admonish them both of their danger and their duty. And even if they are in a good degree enlightened and highly exemplary—a case which in this country is of no unfrequent occurrence—it is still both your duty and your privilege occasionally to hold religious intercourse with them, and to endeavor to stir them up to higher and still higher attainments in religion, or as the case may be, to catch from them a warmer glow of pious feeling than already pervades your own bosom. If I do not greatly mistake, there are few christian families in which this part of duty is conscientiously and faithfully performed. The better performance of it, there is reason to believe, would bring not only to the

members immediately concerned, but to the whole family, a rich reward.

I have already intimated, in the beginning of this chapter, that the best opportunities for christian intercourse are found in the family. Let me mention two or three *seasons* which are peculiarly favorable to this sacred employment.

*Saturday evening*, even where it is not kept as part of the sabbath, brings with it a delightful opportunity to every christian family to engage in religious intercourse.— Suppose the labors of the week to be brought to a close with the going down of the sun, and all secular concerns to be laid aside, that sacred things may be taken up; and suppose the evening to be passed in religious conversation, and reading the scriptures, and devotional exercises; and surely a more hallowed employment for the close of the week, or a more appropriate preparation for the sabbath, cannot be imagined. If christians are disposed, on that evening, to mingle in a larger circle for purposes of devotion and religious improvement, no objection certainly can be urged against it; but if I could be assured that they were spending the evening at home in the manner which I have described, even though I might be present in a larger circle myself, I would bid them God speed in the delightful interchange of religious sentiment, and the grateful mingling of devotional feeling, around the domestic fireside.

And *the Sabbath*, I hardly need say, is pre-eminently a season for christian intercourse in the family. A considerable portion of the day, of course, is to be devoted to public religious exercises; and another portion of it to the duties of the closet; but *some* part of it should al-

ways be allowed to religious conversation. Indeed no conversation that is not religious, unless it be a matter of absolute necessity, ought to be admitted on that day ; none *can* be admitted, but at the expense of disregarding the divine authority. Let those occasions which bring the family together in the course of the day, instead of being perverted, as they too often are, to mere worldly conversation, be improved for purposes of religious edification. Especially, let christian parents be careful to set the example in this respect ; and if they do so, not assuming a gloomy air, but conversing with becoming cheerfulness and familiarity, they may expect not only to see signs of religious improvement in their children and domestics, but to witness the exemplary and delightful sanctification of the sabbath throughout their household.

I may mention, as another season for christian intercourse, *the hour of family devotion*. I have known a few instances in which the hour especially of *evening* prayer in a family was made most delightfully subservient not only to a spirit of devotion, but to improvement in divine knowledge ; and the case to which I refer, is, I believe, quite common in the higher circles of christian society in Great Britain. The members of the household, when the time for domestic worship arrives, are seated around a table, each with a bible ; and while the head of the family takes the lead, the rest follow, in reading a portion of scripture, and making such inquiries, and suggesting such hints, in connexion, as are adapted to awaken interest, to elicit instruction, or to cherish devotional feeling ; and after a considerable time passed in this manner, the evening is concluded by a solemn approach to the throne of grace ;

the prayer deriving its complexion principally from the portion of scripture which has previously been the subject of meditation. I might mention the names of several men in England, not less illustrious for their piety than their rank, in whose families you could never pass a whole evening without witnessing the delightful service which I have described.

I cannot conceive of a more perfect and beautiful resemblance to heaven in any thing earthly, than is to be found in a family, all whose members are united as well in the bonds of christian affection as by the ties of nature, and on whom the hallowed influence of a truly religious intercourse is fully realized. Every thing moves forward harmoniously ; for all have been touched by the same divine impulse. Each one, instead of being absorbed in selfish gratification, is earnestly seeking the happiness of all the rest. There is no scope for the exercise of parental authority ; for the most general expression of the parental will, finds a ready interpreter in the spirit of filial affection ; and the wishes of the parent need only to be understood, to be obeyed. Between parents and children there is the utmost confidence on the one hand, and the utmost condescension on the other ; but it is confidence joined with reverence, it is condescension joined with dignity. Each member feels at liberty to communicate his sentiments and feelings to every other without the shadow of reserve ; while each one in turn takes delight in imparting wisdom, or strength, or comfort, according to the measure of his ability. The scene of domestic worship, and especially the hallowed exercises of the sabbath, partake deeply of the calmness, the sweetness, the sacredness, the strong and thrilling affec-

tion, that characterize the communion of the redeemed around the throne. And the prospects of such a family—who can describe them? They will be helpers of each other on their way to the grave; and when the last survivor is falling into the arms of death, how delightful the thought that they are all about to be re-assembled in the calm region of everlasting rest! And then for those who have mingled here, to be united there; for those who have bowed the knee at the same domestic altar, to cast their crowns together at the Redeemer's feet; for those who have cheered each other in their sorrows, and aided each other in their conflicts, through the daily intercourse of a life, to be rejoicing together in a complete deliverance from all sin and suffering, and in the prospect of everlasting ages of happiness and glory;—imagination in her boldest flights cannot portray the incomparable blessedness of such experience as this! Be it my privilege to belong to a family, all whose members are walking together in christian intercourse in the way to heaven, and I will count myself a thousand fold more happy and more honored, than if I could call the mightiest monarch on earth my father or my brother!

## CHAPTER VIII.

### CHRISTIAN INTERCOURSE OF YOUTH.

IT is a remark justified alike by reason and experience, that the character which a young christian is to form, and carry with him into life, will probably take its complexion, in no small degree, from the influences to which he is subject at the beginning of his course. It is equally obvious that the character which is generally formed by christian youth at any given period, must in all probability determine the general character of the church through at least one generation ; for to say nothing of the influence which they exert in the early part of their course, the time is not distant when the chief labor and responsibility will devolve upon their hands. Whether, therefore, the particular interests of each member, or the general interests of the whole body, be considered, it is matter of great moment that all the influences to which christian youth are subject, should be of a sound and healthful kind ; and as religious intercourse properly conducted, exerts a most benign influence in forming the character, it is vastly important that this privilege should be faithfully improved.

It is highly desirable, owing to the inexperience of christian youth, and the need they stand in of counsel and guidance, that much of their intercourse should be with christians more advanced in age and experi-

ence than themselves. I am well aware that it is a fault of many young persons who have hopefully entered on the christian course, that they have too much confidence not only in their own strength, but their own wisdom ; and that while they are full of the hope, and joy, and zeal, which are often incident to a recent conversion, they are ready sometimes to look with distrust on all the more calm operations of christian feeling, and even to interpret the soundest lessons of practical wisdom, as the suggestions of coldness or unbelief. They are especially liable, in these circumstances, to undervalue the counsels and instructions of more experienced christians ; and to choose to rejoice together in the ardor of their first love, rather than to listen to the monitory voice of age and wisdom. But nothing is more certain than that this is a great practical error. If they are indeed the disciples of Christ, they are utterly incapable of estimating the trials that are before them ; or the danger they are in of falling into forbidden paths, of wounding their own peace, and bringing dishonor on the cause of Christ ; and they need to be met here by advice and warning which are the result of a more extensive experience than their own.— Or if, as is by no means improbable, they have deceived themselves, and are indulging the hypocrite's hope, it is by mingling with those who have been tried and proved by a long course of holy living, that their delusion will be made known to them. And it is not merely from christians of highly cultivated minds and extensive general intelligence, that they may derive important aid ; for it often happens that those in the humbler, and even the humblest, walks of life, are found to be more rich in spiritual experience, and more capable of detecting a false

hope, and ascertaining and confirming a good hope, than many a professor in the higher circles of society, who is distinguished for intellectual culture and refinement.

It has not unfrequently resulted from the spirit of self-confidence which mars the character of many young christians, that they have not only undervalued the privilege of intercourse with those of maturer years and more advanced experience, but when they have been in their presence, have manifested an offensive and dictatorial forwardness. I remember, for instance, to have heard of a case, in which a venerable president of one of our colleges was present in a small religious circle, and one of his pupils—a self confident and beardless stripling, rendered himself so offensively conspicuous by the exuberance of his remarks, that not a word fell from the lips of the worthy president during the whole evening. Young persons should remember that such a course is fraught with injury, alike to themselves and others. While they deprive themselves of the advantage they might otherwise enjoy, they cherish in their own bosoms a spirit which is the exact opposite of christian humility ; and on the other hand, they repel and wound those who are deeply interested in their comfort and usefulness, and have both the ability and disposition to render them most important service.

But christian youth are also to cultivate a free intercourse with each other. Nearly the same considerations apply here, which have already been mentioned in respect to brothers and sisters of the same family. Supposing they have commenced the christian life about the same time, they will find it easy to commune with each other in respect to the various parts of their religious experience, without reserve ; and the advantage which they

may derive by a comparison of thought and feeling, and by joining in common supplications, will be realized in the enlargement of their religious views, and the invigoration of their pious affections. Or even if they are not of nearly the same age as christians, yet the fact that they are at the same period of life will still impart to their intercourse an air of greater freedom and confidence ; and while all may be mutually benefitted, those of the greater experience will be especially useful to those in whom the principle of divine life, if it have been implanted, has but just begun to operate. A meeting of christian youth for free conversation on subjects of experimental piety, in connexion with prayer and reading the scriptures, punctually attended at stated periods, would no doubt be one of the best means that could be devised for aiding their growth in grace, and giving to their piety a sound, consistent and elevated character.

Let christian youth, moreover, not only in the family, as has already been suggested, but in more extended circles, associate for mutual improvement in religious knowledge. As the business of sabbath school instruction devolves, in a great degree, upon this class, perhaps there could not be a better opportunity for accomplishing this end, than is furnished in connexion with the weekly preparation for the sabbath school exercise. Let the teachers of a sabbath school, and as many other young christians as are disposed to associate with them, meet statedly every week for free conversation on the portion of scripture which is to constitute the lesson of the succeeding sabbath—each one having diligently studied it in private ; let there be a perfectly unreserved interchange of views in respect to the meaning of every part of it ; let each feel

at liberty to suggest whatever difficulties may occur to him, and bring out the result of his own reflection and reading for the consideration and benefit of all ; and let God's blessing be devoutly implored in connexion with the exercise ; and it is almost certain that the individuals who are thus associated will soon acquire an extensive knowledge of God's word. At the same time, it is hardly necessary to say that such an exercise would serve to keep alive their zeal as teachers, and would be a pledge for the enduring and increasing prosperity of the school with which they are connected.

It is proper also that christian youth should associate for the promotion of various benevolent objects. It cannot be denied that it is owing, in no small degree, to the young men of our country—though, by no means, exclusively, to professors of religion—that the Temperance cause has gone forward with such unexampled success ; and indeed there is scarcely any great and good object that has attracted the regard of the christian community, which does not owe a considerable measure of its success to the enterprising spirit of our youth. Let christian youth generally associate for the promotion of the great cause of truth and piety, in whichever of its hallowed departments they choose to act ;—no matter whether their immediate object be the circulation of the bible, or of religious tracts, or the education of ministers, or the support of missionaries, or the emancipation of the poor, degraded African, or any thing else that looks towards the moral renovation of the world ; while the result of their efforts will tell gloriously on the destinies of their fellow-men, there will be a quickening and grateful influence exerted upon their own characters. They will thus,

in the happiest manner, become trained in the school of benevolent action ; and will early be imbued with a spirit which will render them, as long as they live, fellow-workers unto the kingdom of God.

While it is at once the duty and privilege of christian youth, in any circumstances, to mingle together, as opportunity offers, with a view to mutual religious improvement, there are some peculiar reasons for such intercourse between professors of religion, who are members of the same literary institution : and the number of such at this day, in our academies, and especially in our colleges, is very considerable. These young men need the benefit of christian intercourse, because they are, in some respects, peculiarly exposed to temptation. There is danger that their literary pursuits will engross their whole attention ; and that, in their eagerness to cultivate the intellect, they will neglect the greater business of keeping the heart. There is danger that they may come under the influence of an unhallowed ambition ; that they may grow vain of their own superior success, on the one hand, or envious of the greater attainments of their associates, on the other. And there is danger, moreover, that, by being so frequently and so directly in contact with those of their own age and pursuits, who treat religion either with indifference or contempt, they will come insensibly to lose sight, in some degree, of their christian responsibilities, and to lower their standard of christian character. It is a lamentable fact that the history of most of our colleges furnishes instances not a few, of young men having entered them, giving rich promise of christian fidelity and usefulness, whose spirituality has gradually declined under the influence of temptation, until there has scarcely remained

any visible mark of distinction between them and those through whose instrumentality they have been ensnared. And if they are, by the very circumstances of their condition, thus exposed, and actually do, in many instances, thus stumble and fall, how manifestly are they bound to endeavor to fortify themselves against temptation, by mutually keeping each other under a christian influence ! As they would avoid the guilt of a grievous backsliding, and the odium of being held up as hypocrites or apostates, and the cruel ingratitude of wounding afresh that Saviour who was bruised for their iniquities, let them hold frequent and intimate communion together, with a view to quicken each others' zeal, to arm each other more thoroughly for the conflict with surrounding temptations, and in every way to subserve each others' spiritual interests to the extent of their power.

And while this class of youth stand peculiarly in need of all the benefit that can be secured by christian intercourse, they are furnished, by their condition, with as good an opportunity for it as can be desired. The case is hardly, in any respect, different from that of brothers of the same family, living under the same roof. Where those who occupy the same apartment are both, or all, professors of religion, there may be more or less in the conversation of every day—to say nothing of the hours of morning and evening devotion—which may exert upon each a benign and healthful influence. And then there may be frequent meetings, consisting of a larger or a smaller number, for the express purpose of religious intercourse ; and these meetings may be constituted with reference to intimate acquaintances and personal friendships, or on any other principle which may seem desirable.

If it should occur to any one that the system of study in most of our literary institutions is designed to occupy the whole time, so that there is none left for the intercourse which I am urging, my reply is, that a suitable degree of this intercourse, while it furnishes relief to the mind from purely intellectual pursuits, prepares it for acting in those pursuits with more freedom and vigor ; and I venture to say that, wherever the experiment has been made, this remark has been fully justified by the result of it. That calm and peaceful state of the affections which christian communion is adapted to produce, exerts a direct influence upon the intellect, giving it in a higher degree, the command of its own powers, and bringing it into action under a more impressive sense of responsibility. I would suggest to any religious student, who is disposed to complain of want of time for intercourse with his christian companions around him, or rather, who is willing to urge this as an apology for neglecting such intercourse, whether the evil would not be entirely removed by a faithful improvement of the time which he devotes to conversation of a mere worldly, if not absolutely frivolous, character. Let professors of religion in these circumstances accustom themselves to relax from the habit of severe mental effort, by communing with each other in respect to their most important interests ; let the retired walk for exercise, in which only two or three friends are brought together, be improved for the purpose of devout and edifying discourse ; and the secret will quickly be learned, that distinguished scholarship and eminent piety are by no means incompatible ; and that he who apologizes for the neglect of christian intercourse

from the lack of time, foolishly trifles with his own conscience, and cheats himself out of a rich blessing.

Moreover, christian youth who are brought together in a literary institution, have in view, in most cases, the same profession : far the greater part of them are looking forward to the christian ministry. As this is the most responsible office which a mortal can sustain, and has a more direct and momentous bearing than any other upon the eternal destinies of men, how suitable is it that they who are anticipating its duties and responsibilities, should, even at an early period, interchange their sentiments and feelings respecting it, and aid each other, so far as they can, in the great work of preparation. No human mind can estimate the amount of good, which may result—which, in some instances, has resulted from intimate communion among christian youth, who have been associated during the progress of their education. The first mission from this country to the heathen was projected by Mills, Hall, Richards, and perhaps one or two other devotedly pious young men, while they were members of Williams college. Other instances might be mentioned in which the resolution for missionary life has been formed, in similar circumstances ;—a resolution which has subsequently been carried into effect, and has proved itself to have been the germ of a rich amount of spiritual blessing to the heathen world. Let other christian youth, placed in a similar condition, remember that if they are faithful in communing together as christians, they cannot know the amount of good they may be accomplishing, not only for themselves but others. The plans which

they form may remain unexecuted, and the prayers which they offer may remain unanswered, for years ; and yet those plans may ultimately go into effect, and those prayers be answered, in a train of blessings which an angel's tongue could not describe, nor an angel's mind conceive.

## CHAPTER IX.

### CHRISTIAN INTERCOURSE BETWEEN THE HIGHER AND LOWER CLASSES.

THERE are two considerations which seem to lie at the foundation of all proper views of the subject to be presented in this chapter. The first is, that God has not only given the same nature, the same capacities, the same principle of immortality, to persons in the higher and lower walks of life, but that christians in all the ranks of society, have been redeemed by the same blood, sanctified by the same Spirit, are sustained by the same living hopes, and are ultimately to share in the same glorious reward. The other is, that God, in his providence, has been pleased to constitute various distinctions in society ; giving to some, measures of talent, and wealth, and influence, which he withholds from others. That there is this inequality in the distribution of the divine gifts, no one can doubt, for a moment, who casts his eye around him ; and that this inequality was intended to be the foundation of certain distinctions, is taken for granted in the whole tenor of scripture, and especially in all those passages which prescribe the reciprocal duties of superiors and inferiors. That these distinctions may be improperly magnified, and greatly abused, there is abundant proof in the whole history of man ; but they were ordained by infinite

wisdom and goodness notwithstanding ; and that for most important purposes.

Now it is a dictate of reason, that every condition in life has its appropriate course of conduct ; in other words, that men are to act with reference to the circumstances in which Providence has placed them. What then is the inference from the fact, that christians in the higher and lower walks of life, are made of one blood, are the servants of one master, the subjects of one redemption ? Most clearly, that they are bound to recognise and treat each other as brethren. And what again is to be inferred from the fact that some of them are elevated in their worldly condition, while others are known only in the walks of obscurity ? Doubtless it is, that their treatment of each other, while it is always to be worthy of the relation of christian brethren, is to be modified, in some respects, by the difference in their providential allotments. While the former consideration should no doubt exert the primary influence, the latter ought, by no means, to be overlooked.

It would seem to be the intimation of Providence that, as a general rule, the greatest degree of christian intimacy should be found among those who hold the same rank in society ; for while it may ordinarily be expected that persons in such circumstances will most readily find opportunities for intercourse with each other, there will also be a general similarity of taste and feeling which will serve as a powerful means of mutual attraction. There is perhaps rarely a christian who will not find, on reflection, that the friend to whom he is accustomed to unbosom most freely the secrets of his religious experience, is one whose habits and feelings, in other respects, are gen-

erally in accordance with his own, and who withal occupies the same place in society with himself. There are certainly exceptions from this ; but the general fact is unquestionable.

But then it admits of no question that christians are to mingle freely with their fellow christians beyond the circle into which they are more immediately thrown by the allotments of Providence ; in other words, the high and the low, the rich and the poor, the learned and the ignorant, are to meet and commune together, not merely in the sanctuary, or at the table of the Lord, but in a more private and social manner, as the disciples of a common master. How much of this intercourse there shall be, every christian must determine for himself by a reference to the unerring standard of duty ; and, of course, no general rule can be given, which will apply to all particular cases, as each case may be modified by its own peculiar circumstances ; nevertheless, I think it is easy for any christian to decide that, even in our own country, where there are fewer obstacles to this intercourse than any where else, there is much less of it than the spirit of the gospel, or the interests of either the higher or lower classes, demand. Is it not a melancholy fact that, in a large proportion of evangelical churches, especially in our more populous towns, the members in humbler circumstances are scarcely known to many of their brethren and sisters of more elevated condition, unless it be from their occasional meetings at the communion table ?

I would say, in general, that it is exceedingly desirable that the members of each church should all be personally known to each other, in order that they may feel a deeper interest in each others' spiritual prosperity, and

be enabled the better to discharge their reciprocal obligations ; and I would have, at least, so much intercourse between the different classes as to secure this important end. Let them come together, not merely at the weekly lecture or prayer meeting, but occasionally also at each others' dwellings ; and let every other consideration for the time, be lost sight of, in the hallowed communion of sanctified hearts ; and let all the formalities of worldly intercourse give way to that sacred and delightful freedom which a fervent piety always inspires. But the occasion on which christians in the higher walks are more especially bound to seek intercourse with those in humbler circumstances, is when the latter are in affliction. When the hand of God has fallen heavily upon them, and, by some adverse dispensation, their scanty pittance has been swept away ; or when death has come into their dwelling, and broke some tender tie, and set their hearts to bleeding in anguish ; or when sickness has withered their energies, and thrown them upon the charity of the world, and the question forces itself upon them, ‘ What will become of their poor helpless children when they are in the grave ?’—in these, and all other circumstances of affliction into which they may be thrown, let their more favored brethren and sisters count it a privilege to fly to their relief and consolation. Let them go in the affectionate spirit of their Master ; and proffer both their sympathy and their aid ; and let them bless God that he has given them the ability not only to comfort them that mourn, but to administer to the wants of the helpless and destitute. I have known some christians, and especially some females, whom Providence has placed high in the ranks of affluence and honor, who have been so

awake to every note of sorrow among the poor and wretched, when death seemed to be looking into almost every dwelling, and the fountains of human wo to be well nigh broken up, that I can scarcely think of them but as angels of mercy ; and I anticipate for them, at the last, from the compassionate Redeemer, the exalted Judge, that most welcome benediction, “ Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me.”

As every condition in life has its peculiar temptations, so there is danger here, both on the right hand and on the left. There is danger not only that there will not be a suitable commingling of christians in the higher and the lower classes, but that this undue reserve and distance will be connected with feelings which are unworthy of the christian character. The great evil to be guarded against by the former, is a spirit of pride ;—a disposition to pass by their christian neighbors of humbler condition with an air of indifference, which shall seem to them to say that there is nothing that can screen poverty from neglect. I have known instances in which professed christians of high standing in the world, have allowed a poor but worthy member of their own church, to sicken, and languish, and suffer, for months, almost at their very door, without indicating even by one kind inquiry, that they had any bowels of tenderness or compassion towards him ; and other cases have I known in which even a look of recognition on the part of an obscure christian towards one who has moved in circles above him, has been met with a haughty and chilling reserve, which was intended as a signal that no intercourse could be expected. These are indeed extreme cases ; and it is to be hoped, not of

every day's occurrence ; but it cannot be denied that more or less of this proud spirit is frequently manifested ; and every christian in the higher circles of society has reason to take heed lest he be brought under its influence.

There are considerations enough, which one would suppose, might occur to the mind of any christian, as a rebuke to the first risings of this unhallowed temper. Suppose you *are* distinguished from most of your fellow-christians by the amount of wealth, or talent, or influence, you possess ;—but have you forgotten who it is that hath made you to differ ? And have you forgotten that the superior gifts which have been bestowed upon you, were designed not for the benefit of yourself alone, but of others ;—not to cherish your pride, but to increase your usefulness ? Has it occurred to you that these distinctions of which pride is so ready to take advantage, will all pass away with your breath ; that they exist independently of moral character ; that a distinction which infinitely outweighs them all—that of earnest and elevated piety—may be possessed by the obscurest individual you meet, and in a degree which, peradventure, may cast into a deep shade your own spiritual attainments ? And has not that obscure disciple a claim upon thy regards as a brother in Christ ? Has he not experienced the efficacy of the same atoning blood, and the same renewing grace ; and is he not rejoicing in the prospect of the same final rest, with thyself ? And art thou not pledged to him as a brother, by the condition of that covenant to which thou hast freely given thy consent ? He *is* thy brother, even though he may be clothed in rags, and live in a hovel ; and if thou art ashamed of the relation, take heed lest He who in condescension has styled himself the believer's elder

brother, should disown thee for thy pride, when he is making up his jewels.

But if there is danger that christians in the more elevated walks of life, will make too much of this distinction, and will be disposed to look superciliously on those below them, and scarcely to recognise the tie of christian brotherhood beyond the circles of worldly greatness, so also there is danger, on the other hand, that a spirit of envy will corrode the breasts of good men in humbler circumstances, and that they will be satisfied with nothing short of a complete annihilation of those distinctions which Providence has manifestly ordained. I have in my eye, at this moment, a striking example of this envious spirit ;—a man who, I believe, makes higher pretensions to holy living than most professors with whom I am acquainted, but who is constantly betraying a temper which shows that religion is far from having in subjection his whole heart. His favorite and perpetual theme is the pride of his neighbors ; the evil which grieves his spirit more than every other is the pride of his neighbors ; and really you would suppose, judging from his conversation, that if this one thing were fairly taken out of the way, and the distinction between the higher and lower classes blotted out, and all professors of religion, whatever their worldly condition might be, recognised as, in every respect, on an equality—you would imagine, I say, that nothing more remained to be done before the introduction of millenial glory. And I am sorry to believe that this individual to whom I refer, represents a far more numerous class in the church than at first view would be supposed to exist ; or rather, the spirit which is here exemplified, operates in very many with greater or less degrees

of strength. Even where professors in the higher circles manifest a disposition to cultivate a christian friendship and intercourse with those in the lower, there is frequently a reluctance on the part of the latter to accede to their proffers, growing out of an unreasonable impression that they regard it as condescension to meet them even as christians ; and ‘if there must be a distinction,’ they are ready to say, though certainly not in the right spirit, ‘let it extend to every thing.’ Instances, if I mistake not, often occur, in which christians in humble circumstances are themselves entirely responsible for the fact that they have little or no intercourse with their brethren and sisters of more elevated condition : the privilege is really proffered to them, and their jealousy keeps them from accepting it, at the very time that they are talking about the barriers which have been erected in the church by human pride.

Let no one suppose that I intend to charge this indiscriminately upon all christians, or even the mass of christians, in the obscurer classes of society—on the contrary, I well know that there are multitudes to whom these remarks do not at all apply, and who cherish towards their superiors in worldly standing the very spirit we could desire. Nevertheless, as I have already remarked in respect to the former class, every individual is in danger ; and has reason to commune diligently with his own heart, lest this spirit which I am reprobating should gain dominion over him, while yet he has not begun to suspect himself under its influence. Remember that it was the design of Providence that these distinctions should exist, and that your desire that they should be abolished has in it the elements of a spirit of complaint against God. Re-

member that the amount of human happiness depends little on external circumstances—almost entirely on the state of the heart ; and that, even if you *are* neglected by those who are bound to love and treat you as brethren, the peace of an approving conscience, and the smile of an approving Saviour, may well make you bear it without a murmur. But be not too ready to surmise that there is neglect, where none is intended. Cheerfully accept the expressions of christian friendship that are proffered you ; and never let it be your fault, if there is a greater distance between you and some of your fellow professors, than is consistent with the obligations into which you have mutually entered. Cherish habitually that spirit of good will, which will make your own bosom the dwelling of peace, which will secure to you the blessedness of him that thinketh no evil, and which will dispose you to endeavor to benefit by your prayers those with whom you are prevented from mingling in christian intercourse.

There are advantages to be derived from intercourse between christians of the higher and lower classes, which strongly urge upon each class the importance of cultivating it. To those in a humble condition, it brings the consolation and relief which their depressed circumstances often greatly require ; and it is adapted to cherish in them a spirit of contentment. If, amidst the multiplied troubles and embarrassments incident to their condition, they can see those whom Providence has raised above them, coming down to sympathise in their sorrows, and proffer their kindness, and point them to sources of consolation, and if need be, to relieve them from want ; it will do much to cheer them in the rugged road which they have to travel. It will awaken the spirit of grati-

tude, not only towards their fellow christians, who thus become their benefactors, but towards Him whom they recognise as the ultimate source of every blessing. It will serve also to enlarge the circle of their sympathies and their influence ; to make them feel more strongly the value of religion, and the hallowed nature of the tie that binds the christian brotherhood together ; to disarm them of that unkindly spirit which so easily wakes at the appearance of the pride of life ; and finally to increase their means of doing good, by giving them access to many whom their influence would otherwise never reach. Let this intercourse be maintained to the extent that the spirit of the gospel fairly requires, and the tone of piety and of active usefulness among the lower classes, would at once be elevated to a point far beyond what has hitherto been attained.

But you mistake if you imagine that the whole benefit of this intercourse is confined to christians in the humbler classes ; on the contrary, it is shared, and sometimes even in a higher degree, by those in more favored circumstances. It is adapted, in any case, to keep them from making an idol of worldly distinction, by showing them that a degree of comfort, in many instances, perhaps far exceeding their own, is consistent with a state of abject poverty ; and it accomplishes the same end still farther, by revealing to them cases in which there has been but a step from affluence to indigence ; in which one hour of vicissitude has swept almost every earthly comfort into the tomb. It is fitted also to carry their minds up to God in a devout recognition of his sovereignty, and in fervent gratitude for his goodness ; for who but God hath made them to differ from those whom they see thus holding com-

munion with poverty and tears? It is adapted too to de-  
velope the principle of christian benevolence in the heart ;  
to cherish those amiable and generous feelings which con-  
stitute, in no small degree, the image of that Saviour  
who went about doing good, and gave his life a ransom  
for us. And last, though not least, it not unfrequently  
secures to the christian the privilege of witnessing exhi-  
bitions of faith and piety, which are pre-eminently fitted  
to quicken and elevate his own devout affections ; for it  
is in the walks of obscurity, and amid scenes of wretched-  
ness, that christian faith often achieves its most glori-  
ous victories. And here my mind fastens with indescri-  
bable interest upon a case long since gone by, in which I  
was permitted for weeks to commune with a spirit which  
was well nigh ripe for heaven, and which was waiting  
for its release amidst a scene of external wretchedness  
which has scarcely had a parallel within my observation.  
The individual to whom I refer, had, for years, been sub-  
ject to total blindness ; and besides the most abject pover-  
ty, there were certain domestic trials which cannot here  
be described, but which always bring agony to the heart.  
In her last lingering sickness it was my privilege to be  
often at her bedside ; and though years have passed away  
since she departed, I have not lost the savor of her piety  
to this hour. Oh I remember well how cheerfully she  
bore a weight of affliction with which comparatively few  
have had to struggle ; how gratefully she acknowledged  
the smallest favor ; how patiently she endured the keen-  
est bodily sufferings ; and how her sightless eye balls  
rolled as if in transport, when she talked of the grace and  
faithfulness of her Redeemer, and of the house not made  
with hands, and of the exceeding and eternal weight of

glory. I stood by her death bed, and caught one of her last whispers ; and it was concerning Jesus and his salvation ; and when I saw that the spirit was gone, I could not forbear to exclaim, ‘ What a contrast between dying in this hovel of wretchedness, and living and reigning in the palace of the king of glory ! ’ Since that period, I have mingled in many a dying scene which has been marked with triumph, and in which I could not doubt that angels were beckoning the spirit away to its everlasting rest ; but never, no never, have I witnessed one, in which were brought together so much of the bliss and the wo of dying, in which there was displayed such a contrast between earthly degradation and heavenly glory, as that which I have described. The hovel where she died, seemed to me to have been consecrated by the scene ; and often to this day, does my mind return to that humble spot, as being associated with the most triumphant departure of an immortal spirit, which it has ever been my privilege to witness.

## CHAPTER X.

### EPISTOLARY INTERCOURSE AMONG CHRISTIANS.

IT is one of the kind provisions of Providence that, while it is the lot of those who are endeared to each other often to be thrown asunder, and sometimes separated during a great portion of their lives, it is still their privilege to keep alive their interest in each others' welfare, and sometimes render each other the most important service, by means of an epistolary correspondence. This privilege belongs to christians in common with others ; and it is so important as a medium of religious intercourse, that I trust it will not be deemed improper that I should here make it the subject of a distinct chapter.

A correspondence, such as is here contemplated, may have for its leading object *the communication of religious intelligence*. It is always a matter of interest to the true christian, to hear any thing respecting the progress of the kingdom of Christ ; to know what is doing, whether by the agency of God or man, whether in a revival of religion, or in the progress of benevolent effort, to sustain and advance the interests of that kingdom. And such intelligence, while it is adapted to confirm the christian's faith in the promises of God, and to bring him upon his knees in devout thanksgiving, has a tendency also to increase the fervor of his supplications, and the vigor of his efforts, in reference to the same glorious object. Sup-

pose the individual with whom you correspond, is cast by Providence in a broad field of missionary labor ; or suppose he is himself a missionary, encountering perils of the heathen, or perils of the wilderness, for the sake of making known the glorious gospel of the blessed God ;— how much would there be in the communications that would naturally come from his pen, to quicken your zeal and your prayers for the salvation of the world ! Or suppose him to be in the midst of an extensive and powerful revival of religion, where a spirit of prevailing prayer was bringing to the heart of many a sinner the convincing influences of the Spirit of God, and the new song was bursting forth on every side from lips hitherto unaccustomed to the language of praise ; or suppose him actually to have passed through such a scene, and to have been the witness of all that wonderful work of God, and to be able to form a sober and rational estimate of its blessed results ;—do you not believe that a faithful record of his observation and experience during that period, would serve to rouse you from spiritual languor, if you had fallen into that state, and to impart to you something of the spirit of a revival ? Instances have frequently occurred in which a communication from some private individual to his friend, describing the spiritual wants and desolations of the region around him, has wakened in the bosom of that friend a spirit of sympathy and holy benevolence, which has been rapidly communicated to the hearts of other christians, and the result has been that some new and noble project has been started, which has been the means, under God, of bringing tens of thousands who were sitting in darkness, to rejoice in the light of the gospel. Indeed, if I do not mistake, some of the grandest

benevolent institutions of the age, owe their origin to precisely such a circumstance as I have described. And then again, in how many instances have revivals of religion, so far as human agency is concerned, been traced to a similar origin ! An individual in the midst of a revival writes to his friend a description of the scenes that are passing around him ; and this news of the triumph of God's grace circulates through a community of christians ; and it brings up to their minds in painful contrast the apathy that prevails among themselves ; and in the train of this comes the spirit of humiliation and self-reproach, of dependance, and zeal, and confidence in God ; and presently a cloud of mercy appears in the heavens no bigger than a man's hand ; and this strengthens their faith and encourages their importunity ; and the result is, that what at first was an object of desire, has become a matter of experience ; and here is another revival to be added to the history of the triumphs of divine grace, and to yield its revenue of glory to God, and of joy to the angels. I doubt not that every christian who has been at all conversant with revivals, will be able to recall cases, in which these remarks have a complete illustration.

Or such a correspondence may be taken up chiefly with *discussions respecting various parts of religious truth* : it may have respect either to the leading truths of the gospel in which the individuals concerned are agreed, and may be designed merely to render more extensive and exact each others' views of the christian system ; or else it may relate to some minor points of doctrine, in regard to which there is an honest difference of opinion between them. In the former case, there is room not only for the vigorous exercise of the intellect, but for warm and quick-

ening appeals to the heart : while there is an opportunity for holding up divine truth before the mind in all its richness and glory, and bringing out the results of deep and patient reflection, the practical bearings of the truth may, at the same time, be illustrated and urged, and thus the affections elevated, and the life improved, by its influence. In the latter case—that is, where the correspondence relates to points of difference confessedly not fundamental—it presents, in some respects, a much better opportunity for an investigation of the disputed subject, and for arriving at a just conclusion respecting it, than could be furnished by personal conversation ; for the mind is less liable to perturbation, and proportionally more likely to form a correct estimate of evidence : there is not the same danger that it will commit itself by unguarded assertions, which, on the one hand, in consequence of their unreasonableness, it will be hard to defend, and on the other, on account of a lurking pride of opinion, it will be hard to retract. And even where there is no change effected on either side, the discussion itself will perhaps be more likely to be profitable, than if it were conducted by ordinary conversation ; for there is not only less danger to the feelings in the former case than in the latter, but the mind moves with greater confidence, and its powers are brought into more regular, if not more vigorous, operation.

Or else a religious correspondence may be chiefly of an experimental character, and may have for its leading object, *the culture of pious affections*. In letters that are written with reference to this end, there is often something equally sublime and delightful. Let an intelligent and devoted christian sit down in the unrestrained confidence of friendship, to indulge his warm feelings in writing to

some beloved friend of a kindred spirit ; and let him tell of his trials and conflicts on the one hand, and of the strength he has received, and the victories he has gained on the other ; let him record the joys he has experienced in finding God his refuge in the time of trouble, and the sweet aspirations of faith and hope which he has breathed forth, when the light of the divine countenance has shone into his soul ; let him tell how the heaviest weight of sorrow has seemed light, when his eye has been turned towards his heavenly home ; and there will be in all this an elevation of pious sentiment, a living, burning spirit of devotion, that can scarcely fail to awaken a devout response in the heart of him who contemplates it. We need not go beyond our own country to find instances both of men and women, whose correspondence is preserved for the benefit of the world, who have left upon their letters the impress of a spirit which seemed well nigh ripe for heaven. Though some of them have long since entered into rest, these delightful effusions of christian friendship and elevated piety remain to represent them on earth, and to assist in guiding other pilgrims to their destined home.

Having alluded to the fact that the letters which pass between christian friends are sometimes published after their decease, I cannot forbear, in this connexion, to remark that this has not unfrequently been done with bad taste and questionable discretion. I do not think that it ought to be considered, in all cases, as treason to the memory of the departed, to give to the world even the more fugitive thoughts they may have committed to paper, provided they are of sufficient value to warrant it ; and I cannot suppose that even the fact that the

individual would not probably have listened to such a proposal, if it had been made to him in anticipation, ought always to prevail against such a measure ; for it is more than possible that he may have formed too low an estimate of these productions, and they may have an adaptation to do good of which he had not the most distant conception. I cannot, at this moment, think of a case more in point as an illustration, than is furnished by the published letters of Robert Hall. The editor of his works had been, during a considerable part of his life, one of his most intimate friends ; and no man knew better than he Hall's excruciating sensitiveness to the least defect in style, and how little he was satisfied with the result of his own most labored and most masterly efforts ; nevertheless he judged, (and I am sure the unanimous voice of posterity will be that he judged rightly) that it was proper to draw forth from the archives of private friendship, many of his letters, which were probably written without a suspicion that they would ever meet any other eye than that of the person to whom they were addressed. But these letters bring out the character of the man, as no other of his writings do ; they show that he was great even in the smallest matters ; and Doctor Gregory, instead of having been unjust to the memory of his friend, in giving them to the world, has brought additional honor to his memory, and conferred a favor no doubt upon all coming generations. But notwithstanding there are cases, and many cases, in which it is perfectly right and proper to bring to light, for the benefit of the world, correspondence which was intended to be private, I am sure that this has often been done, where the prospect of any good result was too slight or equivocal to justify such

a procedure. There have been instances in which posthumous letters have been published, revealing secrets of a personal nature, which ought never to have met the public eye, and containing nothing of sufficient importance to constitute the shadow of an apology for this rude violation of the dictates of honor and friendship. As a general rule, I would say that private letters should not be published after the writer of them is gone, unless they are of such a character as to subserve some useful end ; but if they are likely to be of important service to the cause of truth and piety, and no special obligation of friendship is violated in their being given to the world, I know of no good reason why they should be withheld.

There is, if I mistake not, a peculiar interest attached to a correspondence between christians who reside in different countries, and in distant parts of the world from each other. If the providence of God has actually brought them together, and permitted them thus to form a personal acquaintance, how delightful to have that acquaintance, which, it may be, was the result of a single accidental meeting, or one brief interview—continued, and cherished, and rendered a source of mutual advantage, during the residue of life ! An attachment formed between christians under these circumstances, and cherished by a subsequent correspondence, has sometimes been productive not only of great personal gratification, but of much advantage to the general interests of religion. And even between individuals who have never seen, and are never likely to see, each others' faces in the flesh—individuals who will always be separated by the wide ocean till they meet in heaven, there may be, and often has been, a correspondence, which has made them cease to regard each

other as strangers, and ere long bound their hearts together with the cord of a strong and enduring friendship.— The great and good Doctor Erskine of Edinburgh corresponded with several of the most distinguished divines of his day in this country ; and though not one of them had ever seen him, I venture to say that his letters to them could scarcely have breathed more of genuine christian affection, if they had been the companions of his whole life. How delightful the thought that two such men as Edwards and Erskine, after having been in the habit of correspondence for many years, should have had their first meeting in heaven ; that that communion which those great minds had on earth while their sphere of action was on different continents, should be resumed and perpetuated in a world where they see face to face, and mingle in the same song of praise, and walk around the throne together in the light of heavenly glory !

I cannot forbear to mention what I deem of great importance to the interests of religion, a growing spirit of intercourse, not only between individual christians, but ecclesiastical bodies, and theological institutions, of different countries. Between several of the largest of these bodies and institutions in this country, and similar ones in Great Britain, and on the continent of Europe, there is now a free correspondence ; and the effect of it has already been manifest in a growing reciprocal interest in the benevolent operations and religious prospects of each country. And this is a pledge of greater union of effort and prayer in behalf of the common cause : it looks as if the nations of christendom would soon see eye to eye, and would move forward in a solid phalanx for an attack on the empire of darkness. Let this delightful correspon-

dence be continued and perpetuated. Let christians on this side, and christians on the other side, of the Atlantic, cherish towards each other the warm spirit of brotherly affection. Let this hallowed intercourse of minds and hearts ripen into a pure and elevated friendship, which shall be a source of light and blessing on each side of the ocean, until christians of every name and every nation shall be brought together as one ransomed, glorified community.



## CHAPTER XI.

### PERVERSION OF CHRISTIAN INTERCOURSE.

SUCH is the weakness and depravity of human nature, that there is nothing good in this world, which is not liable, by abuse, to become the instrument of evil ; and so far are christians here, in their best state, from having reached the fulness of the stature of perfect persons in Christ, that even some of their richest privileges, and most invaluable blessings, are often perverted to foster tempers and frames of feeling, which are at war with their own spiritual improvement, and are rebuked by the genius of the gospel. This remark applies in its full force to the intercourse of christians with each other. That it is in itself a rich blessing, has, I trust, been made abundantly evident from many of the remarks in the preceding pages : that it may be, and often is, perverted to serious evil, I shall endeavor to show in the present chapter. Some of the evils to which, by perversion, it is made subservient, are the following :

1. *The neglect of other equally or more important duties.* God has given us our time to be occupied in the discharge of *all* the duties which he requires of us ; and he has given us time enough for this ; and if we complain of the want of time for our appropriate duties, we shall find either that some part of it goes needlessly to waste,

or that we are giving to one set of employments hours which, it is the clear intimation of Providence, should be devoted to another. Hence it is easy to see that an employment which, in itself, may be very praiseworthy and useful, may, under certain circumstances, be wrong ; that is, it may occupy time which Providence designed for other purposes in their place still more important. This remark applies to christian intercourse : however desirable it is when holding its proper place among the duties of the religious life, it may either occupy too much time, or improper seasons may be allotted to it ; and in either case, it indirectly ministers to evil.

It has sometimes happened—though the case may not be of very frequent occurrence—that christians have yielded to the desire of mingling with each other, so far as improperly to neglect their secular concerns. For instance, I have known cases in which professors of religion who have had to labor for a subsistence, have actually neglected, for a season, to make suitable provision for their families, for the sake of devoting themselves almost exclusively to social religious exercises. And I have known other cases in which females have gone out to a morning prayer meeting, (not that I am unfriendly to an attendance on a morning prayer meeting under suitable circumstances,) and have left several little children to take care of themselves, and the breakfast to provide for its own appearance upon the table ; and the consequence has been that the whole order of the family has been disturbed, and an ungodly husband has given loose to his angry passions in a torrent of invective, first against his wife, and next against the cause to which she was devoted. I would have christians who are tempted to such a course, re-

member that there are no duties binding upon them more imperatively, than those they owe to their families ; and that inspiration hath uttered a sentiment in respect to the man who provides not for his own, and especially for those of his own house, which may come nearer being applicable to their case than they have ever imagined. I say again, I do not believe that this case often occurs ; and I am well aware that where an improper degree of religious intercourse keeps christians from their appropriate secular duties in one instance, an unreasonable devotion to the world probably interferes with a suitable religious intercourse in hundreds of instances ;—but as it does *sometimes* occur, and always involves serious evil, I have thought proper to notice it.

So also christians frequently substitute a kind of general intercourse with each other, which turns to very little account, for more direct efforts to advance the cause of Christ. There are certain topics connected with religion, which they find it an easy matter to introduce, and which they often bring up without much regard to time or circumstances. One of these is the signs of the times in respect to the state of religion in the immediate neighborhood ; whether the church is generally sunk in spiritual apathy, or whether there are some indications of a revival of religion. I once knew an individual—and I fear there are many others like him—whom I scarcely ever met, but that he introduced the subject of religion in some form or other ; and would often exhibit great fervor in his remarks ; and yet there was not a more inefficient member than he of the church with which he was connected. His conversation seemed to take for granted that there was a great work to be done ; but his conduct

seemed to take for granted that he did his part of it by talking. Probably many professed christians who have never suspected themselves under the influence of this spirit, will discover, upon examination, that they are not entirely free from it ; and if they will commune with their hearts, after having conversed freely and fervently on the importance of a revival or the means of extending it, perhaps they may find that the secret feeling is, that, as they have done the planning, they may fairly enough leave others to execute ; in other words, as they have done the talking, they may leave others to do the work.

There are other cases in which christian intercourse is manifestly perverted to a neglect of keeping the heart. No duty which the christian has to perform requires so much self-denial, and such vigorous and constant effort as this ; and in proportion to the difficulty which it involves is the temptation to neglect it. There are indeed professors of religion who sink so low in spiritual apathy, that they have no occasion to make any compromise with conscience for the entire neglect of this duty ; but in most cases, and especially in the earlier part of a course of backsliding, there is doubtless an attempt to substitute something else in place of it ; and for many persons there is no more convenient substitute than religious conversation. They find it so much easier to yield to the exciting influences of a social meeting, than to probe their own hearts, and ascertain their own errors, and keep down their rising corruptions, that they choose the former to the neglect of the latter ; and so long as they busy themselves in conversing upon subjects in any way connected with the interests of Christ's kingdom, they imagine that the more private concerns of the world within

may safely enough be left, in a great degree, to the control of accidental influences. And while religious intercourse may be resorted to, as an apology to the conscience for the neglect of more spiritual duties, so also, where no such motive operates, it may crowd out those duties, by occupying an undue portion of time. Let an individual devote nearly the whole time that he allots to religious purposes, to intercourse with his fellow christians, no matter in what way, and the inevitable consequence will be that the duties of the closet, on which his growth in grace primarily depends, will be very inadequately performed ; and whatever good he may gain to himself, or accomplish for others, by the course he adopts, will be more than counterbalanced by the loss he will sustain in respect to his personal comforts and attainments in piety.

2. Christian intercourse is often perverted to *purposes of censoriousness*. A censorious spirit is always an unlovely feature in the human character ; but it is especially so in the character of a christian : nevertheless, it must be acknowledged that scarcely any unhallowed temper prevails more extensively than this, among the professed disciples of the benevolent Redeemer. Wherever this spirit exists, it will be found that the individuals concerned censure their fellow professors for some fault from which they suppose themselves at least tolerably free, if not bright examples of the opposite virtue. It will be found, for instance, where persons are together who regard themselves as somewhat distinguished for spirituality and zeal, that they will be exceedingly prone to censure others for worldliness and religious apathy ; and not improbably will condemn some as possessing these qualities, who differ from themselves in nothing except that

their zeal is more pure and less boisterous. On the other hand, where christians are together who are unduly afraid of excitement, and who wish to be known, first of all, as the staunch advocates of order, they will not improbably speak with undue severity of their more zealous brethren ; and may perhaps represent them as completely given up to fanaticism, when the prevailing influence under which they are acting is that of earnest and elevated piety. No man is likely to censure another for faults which he knows are prominent in his own character ; and hence, when you have learned at what points a censorious professor regards himself as least vulnerable, you have ascertained the points at which he will most probably assail the characters of his brethren.

I have known private meetings professedly for purposes of religious improvement, which, I could not doubt, were fitted to accomplish a directly opposite end, by fostering some of the worst passions of the heart. The individuals concerned, while they have seemed to be scarcely conscious of an imperfection in themselves, have been able to discover little else than the most flagrant faults in their brethren and sisters around them. If there has been a prevailing state of apathy, to their fellow professors belongs the whole blame ; or if there is a partial revival, it is *their* fault alone that it does not embrace the whole community in its influence. ‘There are those in the church,’ say they, ‘whose icy coldness chills every pious feeling with which it communicates. The prayer meetings are so formal that no lively christian can find any comfort in them ; and the old fashioned way is kept up of calling on a certain class to pray, when there are numbers obliged to be silent, who are waiting and longing for the privi-

lege. And the minister too—how little of the spirit of a revival *he* has ; how indifferent to the spiritual interests of his flock ; how formal in his preaching and his prayers ; how much afraid to speak the truth boldly, lest by doing so, he should offend some of the more proud and worldly of his hearers !' And with this strain of unhallowed invective have been mingled prayers which partook largely of the same spirit ; in which the great God has been told of things which did not exist ; and if petitions for a revival have been offered, they have been accompanied with little short of imprecations upon those who were supposed to be indifferent to it. I have no doubt that some truly pious people have, for a season, been so far under the influence of delusion, as to have done all, and more than all, which I have described ; but nothing is more certain than that such a course, so long as it continues, brings a cloud over their christian character. Their intercourse with each other is not only a source of mutual injury, by promoting in their own bosoms a spirit exactly opposite to that of the gospel, but so far as its influence extends, it fans the flame of discord, and thus prevents the progress of true piety, all around them.

3. Christian intercourse is often perverted *to cherish a spirit of false humility*. No doubt it is, at once, the privilege and the duty of professors, mutually to impart, in their more private intercourse, a knowledge of each others' personal experience ; that thus they may be fellow helpers together in the christian life. But this is something quite different from a habit which some have, of referring, almost as a matter of course, in every conversation, to their own delinquencies, and sometimes reproaching themselves for faults with which they do not

seem to be specially chargeable. I recollect one good woman whom I was once somewhat in the habit of visiting, who never seemed so much at home on any topic as her own coldness and neglect of duty ; but when, after having listened to her confessions regularly, at every visit, for a long time, I ventured, on one occasion, to take her at her word, and admit the grounds of her self-reproach, and suggest to her that a conviction of having wandered was to no purpose, if it did not lead to reformation ; her manner evidently betrayed surprise, and seemed to say that, however well such remarks might come from herself, it was with an ill grace that another even assented to them. It is a characteristic difference between true and false humility, that the former does, and the latter does not, discover itself without effort ; the one talks of deficiencies because it feels and laments them,—the other, because the language of confession would seem to indicate the spirit of penitence ; and penitence is one of the leading elements of piety. No doubt there may be much of spurious humility in a true christian ; but it always looks suspicious for a professor of religion to be at great pains to make confession of his own errors, and especially of his general coldness and apathy. Such acknowledgments made, as they too often are, with little apparent feeling, are fitted to weaken the sensibility of one's own conscience, and to awaken painful doubts in others whether there is any thing beyond the mere profession.

4. Christian intercourse is perverted to *purposes of ostentation*. This is done sometimes in respect to the matter of the conversation, and sometimes in respect to the time and manner of introducing it. Not unfrequently christians talk boastingly of their own exercises ; and

seem to have forgotten not only the horrible pit and the miry clay, but their present dependance on the influences of divine grace ; and sometimes when they recognise this dependance abundantly in words, they show, by the general spirit of their remarks, that they have unlimited confidence in their own strength. Sometimes professors have reported in meetings, with an air of triumph, the results of their own private labors ; and have spoken with undoubting confidence of the conversions of which they have been instrumental ; and in the act of ascribing the glory to God, have made it painfully manifest that they were taking the glory to themselves. This has a bad effect on the hearts of the individuals immediately concerned ; because, while it originates in a wrong state of feeling, it is fitted to cherish it into a habit. Nor is its influence in any respect desirable on those christian friends with whom they associate ; for it serves to mar the pleasure of their intercourse, or what is worse, through the power of example, they gradually come under the influence of the same spirit. So also there is frequently an ostentation in respect to the time and manner in which religious conversation is introduced. The secrets of christian experience are freely spoken of in the presence of the world, and in circumstances which look as if there was some special design or effort to attract attention. And instances have not unfrequently occurred, in which two individuals have monopolized the conversation of a considerable circle, confining it almost exclusively to their own feelings ; and have persevered in doing so, even after one or more attempts have been made to give it a more general and useful direction. This again is injurious in its influence upon those who talk and those who listen ; for

it betrays a spirit which it is wrong to indulge, and the exhibition of which, like any other bad example, it is dangerous to witness.

5. *A spirit of self-righteousness* is another of the evils to which christian intercourse, by being perverted, is often made subservient. There is scarcely any unhallowed feeling in the bosom of the christian, so subtle in its operations as this ;—none which is exterminated, or even detected, with greater difficulty. There is nothing which will not serve as aliment for it ; and not unfrequently, when the christian imagines himself most free from its influence, it lives and operates in that very exercise of mind, in which he is congratulating himself upon having gained the victory over it. It is easy to see how this spirit often gathers strength by means of the intercourse which christians have with each other. In holding such intercourse, they recognise the fact that they are discharging one of the duties of the religious life ;—a duty too which is usually considered as indicating a spiritual mind, and the faithful performance of which is certainly a mark of distinction even in the church ; and hence there is great danger that a lurking spirit of self-righteousness will take advantage of this, and entrench itself more strongly in the heart by the very means which ought to be instrumental of exterminating it. The secret, though unacknowledged, and perhaps undetected, feeling, is, that what they have been doing has had in it something of merit ;—something to catch and please the eye of omniscience ; and when they have separated, no doubt it has sometimes been with that spirit which dictated the thanksgiving of the Pharisee, that he was not as other men.

And in addition to this, it is a melancholy fact that the

*conversation* of professors of religion is often of a character peculiarly adapted to foster a self-righteous spirit. Whenever they indulge in uncharitable remarks respecting their fellow professors, there is great reason to fear that they are secretly looking at their own characters in the lustre of comparison. Or when they speak with great freedom, and without respect to circumstances, of their own private exercises, adverting with little of the appearance of humility to the peculiarities of their own experience ; they have reason to take heed lest they are indulging a spirit themselves, and cherishing a spirit in others, which has little resemblance to that feeling of entire unworthiness and dependance, which prompts its possessor to sink into the dust, and give to God all the glory of his salvation.

6. The intercourse of professors of religion with each other is probably often perverted *to minister to their self deception*. No doubt it encourages this spirit, just so far as it promotes a spirit of self righteousness ; for it is obvious that the latter never prevails, but that it includes, in some degree, the former. But is there not reason to believe that professors blind themselves and each other more directly by their conversation ; applying the flattering unction to their own souls, by using language which would indicate a high tone of christian feeling, when the feeling is not present ; and doing substantially the same thing for those with whom they converse, by seeming to take for granted the elevation of their piety, and the certainty of their salvation. Let an individual accustom himself to use the language of strong faith, or deep humility, or fervent desire, as indicating a tone of feeling to which he is conscious he ought to attain, though he has

not attained it already ; and at no distant period he will come to imagine that the expressions of his lips are a true index to the feelings of his heart ; and thus he will be liable to settle down with the impression that he has reached the manhood of piety, when he is only a babe in Christ ; or else that a principle of religion has been implanted in his heart, when he is really a stranger to all gracious exercises. And in like manner, let an individual, (no matter at how low a rate he may estimate his religious attainments) frequently hear himself indirectly quoted by his fellow professors as a model of christian character ;—let him hear his gift of conversation, or exhortation, or prayer, greatly extolled by those in whose judgment he is accustomed to confide ; and the result will almost certainly be, that he will conclude, in this instance, to trust the judgment of others rather than his own ; and thus may deceive himself, perhaps fatally, in respect to his own character. This remark has great force in its application to young professors : in consequence of the imprudent remarks which have been addressed to them, by those who have had more experience and ought to have had more wisdom, than themselves, they have formed erroneous conceptions of their own character and condition, and sometimes no doubt have been confirmed in that hope which fails when God taketh away the soul.

And what is the great practical inference which professed christians ought to deduce from all that has been said in this chapter ? Undoubtedly it is, that their intercourse needs to be carefully guarded ; and that the lack of a proper degree of vigilance and attention, may convert that which was intended as a rich blessing, into a source of most serious evil. Let every one, then, con-

tinually watch his own heart in reference to this matter, and devoutly supplicate the aids of God's Spirit, that all his communings with his fellow christians may serve rapidly to advance both him and them in their preparation for an eternal fellowship in the purchased joys and honors of heaven.



## CHAPTER XII.

### OBLIGATIONS TO CHRISTIAN INTERCOURSE FROM THE PECULIAR CHARACTER OF THE AGE.

ENOUGH has been said in the preceding chapters, to show that it is the duty of the disciples of Christ, at all times, and under any circumstances, to cultivate, as they have opportunity, a free and affectionate intercourse with each other. But, if I mistake not, there are some considerations which render this duty peculiarly obligatory upon christians at the present day, growing out of the character of the times on which we have fallen. With some of these considerations I shall occupy the present chapter, and thus conclude this part of the general subject I have undertaken to treat.

1. The present age possesses *a peculiarly social character*. Previous to the Reformation, owing to the thick darkness which brooded over the face of christendom, the different parts of the human family were, to a great extent, secluded from each other. Such was the organization of society, and such the spirit of the times, that even the people of neighboring nations scarcely mingled together at all, unless it were in some enterprise of conflict and blood ; and those who professed to be the followers of Christ, were either immured in monasteries, or performing some solitary pilgrimage, or wearing out their lives in deep retirement, in rearing monuments of meta-

physical acumen and absurdity. But the Reformation produced a mighty change in this respect: while it gave a shock to the established forms of society from which they were destined never to recover, it woke up the human mind to a sense of its own dignity and power, and put it upon great and noble efforts in the various departments of action. A more remote consequence was, that the barriers by which different branches of the human family were separated, began to be broken down; and a more free intercourse was established among the nations; and the light that shone first in one part of the world, darted, almost with the rapidity of a sunbeam, to another. And this state of things has, on the whole, been progressive down to the present hour. Many events which seemed least auspicious of good, such as the conflicts and convulsions of nations, and the deluging of countries with blood, have, no doubt, under a wise and good Providence, been rendered instrumental of breaking up the foundations of many generations, and diffusing just notions in respect to the nature of society, in the train of which may be expected to follow a complete political and moral renovation.

But not to dwell upon the past, the present age far exceeds, in this respect, all that have preceded it. It is impossible to look abroad among the nations of Europe, without perceiving, at once, that the spirit of reform and the spirit of freedom are every where; that the privileged orders of society are rapidly on the wane; and that the great doctrine upon which our own government is built—that all men are by nature free and equal, is likely ere long to become the political orthodoxy of the world.—The effect of this is, not only that different nations are

brought together in friendly intercourse in a far greater degree than formerly, but that the different classes of society mingle together much more, the distance there once was between them being, to a great extent, annihilated. And even in this country, where the obstacles to a free intercourse which I have noticed have never existed, the present age has still a peculiarly social character. The increasingly enterprising spirit which pervades all classes, the freedom which marks the character of our institutions, the interest which every individual has, and the influence he may actually exert, in the affairs of legislation, as well as the almost unprecedented facilities for communication throughout the land—all these various circumstances serve to bring men far more in contact with each other than they were in former times. Scarcely any thing is more common than to meet with an individual who is personally known in almost every part of our country ; and for persons at opposite extremities of the land to confer with each other, is an event of almost every hour's occurrence.

Now from all this I derive an argument, by which to urge upon the disciples of Christ a more liberal and extended intercourse. It is an argument which ought to be felt by christians who reside in countries but partially free ; which yet are coming more and more under the influence of the spirit of freedom. Surely they are bound to take advantage of the increased facilities which are hereby furnished for communicating with their fellow christians, in respect to the great and holy interests of Christ's kingdom. It may be urged also, with good reason, upon christians in our own country ; for here, more than any where else, is every obstacle to religious intercourse taken out of the way.

There is a constant commingling of persons of all classes in the ordinary concerns of life ; and why should not the opportunity thus furnished for *religious* intercourse be faithfully improved ? If the age is more social in its *general* character than any which has preceded it, surely it ought to be proportionally more social in its *christian* character ; and if it is not so, the disproportion reflects dishonor upon the church.

2. The present age is distinguished by *its facilities for the extension of the gospel*. Within less than half a century, the obstacles to the fulfilment of the Saviour's command to preach the gospel to every creature, seemed well nigh insurmountable : both the pagan and papal nations were not only entrenched in delusions which had been fostered by the prejudices of ages, but such were the barriers with which they had surrounded themselves, that they were, to a great extent, inaccessible. But in the progress of events, and, in some instances, by means which, to human wisdom, would have seemed most improbable, these barriers have almost all been taken out of the way ; so that there is now scarcely a spot on the face of the earth, whither the gospel may not be carried with comparative ease and safety. To mention but a single case—the recent revolution in France has accomplished more, in a few days, in opening a way for the free circulation of the gospel through that great and interesting nation, than might have resulted from the ordinary and more quiet course of events, in half a century. In France, though the spirit of persecution now and then breaks out, yet, in general, the inhabitants may be said to breathe the air of freedom ; and at this moment, nothing but pecuniary means are wanting, to carry forward a system of

measures which, at no distant period, should result, by the blessing of God, in a complete downfall of superstition and error, throughout that mighty population. And what is true of France, is true, in a greater or less degree, of almost every nation : the providence of God, during the last half century, seems to have been at work with special reference to preparing the world for the universal reign of truth and holiness.

And in these arrangements of Providence, who cannot perceive that there is a loud and pressing call upon christians, to commune much with each other, in reference to the advancement of Christ's kingdom ? Is it not their imperative duty to associate frequently and extensively with reference to this object ; to stir each other up to higher and holier efforts ; to bring their united wisdom and energy to the formation and execution of plans, with a view to take advantage of the benevolent arrangements of Providence for sending the gospel to every creature ? If the great Head of the church has, in his wisdom and goodness, prepared the way, in a great measure, for this blessed consummation, surely it is time for his people to embody themselves and go forward to the great work, which, in infinite condescension, he has committed to them, with a degree of zeal, energy, and perseverance they have never yet manifested.

3. The present age, at least so far as our own country is concerned, is peculiarly *an age of revivals*. On the leading facts connected with this topic it cannot be necessary that I should dwell ; for every one knows that the effusions of the Holy Spirit, since the beginning of the present century, have constituted an era in the history of the American church ; and few christians among us will

hesitate to identify, in their anticipations, the future prosperity of the church in this land with the prosperity of the cause of revivals. Perhaps too there are few, if any, who will not admit that a season of revival brings with it peculiar responsibility; that there is danger that the Spirit of grace will be grieved away for want of a vigorous co-operation among the disciples of Christ, or because their efforts are not characterized by that wisdom which cometh down from above. The history of the past supplies at once a powerful argument for activity and perseverance in this blessed cause, and a solemn admonition to all who are enlisted in it to take heed that it does not degenerate in their hands.

Here again, what a sacred obligation rests upon the followers of Christ to cultivate the spirit of religious intercourse! It is in the interchange of sentiments in conversation, and in the union of hearts in prayer, that a revival must be expected to begin; and in the same way, to a great extent, so far as human instrumentality is concerned, it must be carried forward, and guarded against abuses, and brought to its legitimate results. When religion languishes, and the need of a revival begins to be deeply felt, what a call is there for christians to meet together, to rouse each other to a higher sense of obligation, and to resolve unitedly upon a course of more vigorous effort! And when the voice of anxious inquiry begins often to be heard, and some are pressing in at the straight gate, and there is a fearful uncertainty who will cherish, and who will resist, the influences of the Holy Spirit, how much occasion is there for the people of God to aid each other by an active and zealous co-operation! And never is this necessity more urgent than when light first

dawns upon the soul, and induces a hope that its sins have been forgiven ; for there is always danger that the convinced sinner will get rid of his anxiety by yielding to some miserable delusion ; and unless christians of knowledge and experience make it a special object, during a revival, to commune faithfully with those who hope they are the subjects of it, the result will almost certainly be that some, perhaps many, will take up with a false hope, and enter eternity at last with a lie in their right hand. So too, the future character and course of a young convert will depend much on his early religious associations, and especially on the degree of counsel, instruction and aid, which he receives from those who are more advanced in the religious life. Indeed a revival of religion is social in its very nature : every thing in the economy of a revival is fitted to bring christians together in holy intercourse : and if I mistake not, it will usually be found that, in this country at least, the degree of christian intercourse in any church will decide how much there is, in that church, of the spirit of a genuine revival.

4. The present age is pre-eminently characterized by *the spirit of action*. I have already adverted to the fact that there is an enterprising spirit abroad in every department of human life ; and that the apathy which the mind of man had contracted during the iron ages of ignorance and barbarism, is well nigh shaken off. But I refer here more particularly to the *religious* activity of the present day ; to the fact that so much is to be done, and so much is actually done, in sustaining and carrying forward that god-like system of charity, which is scattering the richest blessings all over the world. Not that I believe the church is yet thoroughly awake to this great

concern ;—for the burden, or I should rather say the honor, of sustaining her benevolent operations, belongs, to this day, chiefly to a few ; nevertheless those who are awake, in any sense, are awake to action ; and there are two points of view, in which this feature of the age may be regarded as imposing a peculiar obligation on christians to cultivate the habit of religious intercourse.

In the first place, there must be a great degree of intercourse among the disciples of Christ, in order to secure to the activity of the age a right direction. It should be an object with them, to make every thing subservient, so far as they can, to the advancement of the Redeemer's honor ; to endeavor, by God's grace, to sanctify the enterprising spirit of the men of the world ; or even, if it remains unsanctified, still to take advantage of it, to the extent of their ability, in helping forward the great cause of truth and righteousness. But the activity of the *church* needs to have a wise direction also ; and the weakness of human nature, as well as the history of the past, abundantly evinces that she is liable to err in her well-meant projects, and that the most vigilant caution is necessary to secure her against mistakes of a deeply injurious tendency. Is not here then a call upon christians to maintain constant intercourse with each other ;—that the energies both of the church and the world, which are so extensively in operation, may be rendered tributary to the advancement of human happiness, and the extension of the Redeemer's glory ?

But the obligation of christian intercourse may be deduced still farther from the active spirit of the age, inasmuch as it seems essential to guard the church against that decline of spirituality to which a high tone of active

effort exposes her. There is danger that christians, in their zeal for carrying forward great and good objects, which have an immediate bearing on the conversion of the world, will come to overlook, in some measure, that most personal and deeply interesting of all concerns—their own sanctification ; and thus, while they are working hard to dethrone Satan in the world without, he may be availing himself of these very efforts, and especially of their suspended vigilance, to gain an advantage in the world within. There is much reason to fear that this evil has already been extensively felt in connexion with our benevolent operations ; and that it will be felt still more extensively, unless christians keep themselves deeply impressed with a sense of their danger. And hence the great importance of their being fellow workers together, as well in reference to their mutual preservation from evil, as to the accomplishment of the greatest amount of good. Let their meetings be frequent, not merely to devise and carry forward plans for the regeneration of the world, but to cultivate a spirit of dependence, and humility, and faith, and prayer ;—all that, in short, which constitutes the essential elements of christian character ; and the piety of the heart, and the activity of the life, will go hand in hand together ; and the streams of benevolence which will flow out in living action will be in no danger of being exhausted, for the fountain will be kept full by a communication with the overflowing fountain of everlasting love.

And now, Christians, in view of the honor, the responsibility, the danger, of living at such a period as this, will you not awake to the importance of increased fidelity in the duty I have been urging ? In view of the un-

precedent advantages which this age brings with it for promoting the cause of Christ, and in view of the danger that, in falling in with the designs of Providence in this respect, you may neglect your own spiritual interests, and thus obscure your evidences, and impair your comforts, and ultimately lessen your christian influence, I would urge you to have much to do with each other as the disciples of a common Master. See to it that your intercourse accomplishes the double purpose of stimulating you to higher efforts in doing good, and of keeping you unspotted from the world. Then will it be good for you, and good for this generation, and good for posterity, that the privilege of living together, and communing together, has been granted you. And you may hope, with good reason, that you will impart something of excellence to the character of this age, which will not only be transmitted to future ages, but which you will hereafter recognise in the destinies of many of the ransomed and glorified around the throne.

## PART II.

### INTERCOURSE OF CHRISTIANS WITH THE WORLD.

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#### CHAPTER I.

##### THE CHRISTIAN'S INTERCOURSE WITH THE WORLD IN THE COMMON CONCERN'S OF LIFE.

IT is the ordinance of heaven that christians should not attain the fulness of the stature of perfect persons in Christ, without being subjected to a course of moral discipline. Hence we find that they are usually continued, for a longer or shorter period, in this world of labor and trial ; and during their continuance here, they are surrounded by those who are unreconciled to God, and who know nothing of the sanctifying power of the gospel. And Providence has not left it at their option whether to mingle with these persons or not : on the contrary, the relations they sustain to them, as well as a great variety of scripture precepts, obviously require that, instead of attempting to withdraw from the world, they should mingle in it, in a suitable manner, until they are removed to

their final home. The design of Providence in this respect seems to be two-fold ;—first, to improve and perfect their own christian graces by labor and suffering ; and second, to secure the influence of their example and efforts for the benefit of the world.

The relation which christians sustain to “ those who are without,” though it is often most unhappily overlooked and perverted, involves responsibilities to which no one who seriously considers them can be indifferent. Every professing christian who is faithful in his intercourse with the world, has reason to hope that, by the blessing of God, he may save souls from death and hide a multitude of sins ; and on the other hand, if he exhibits a careless and unedifying example, he has reason to fear that he may be instrumental of evil to the souls of his fellow men, the extent of which it must be for the ages of eternity to reveal.

It is a mistake into which many professors of religion have fallen, that nearly all that is to be done for the spiritual benefit of unrenewed men, is to be effected by means of direct personal efforts ; leaving little or nothing to the general influence of a pious example. That it is the duty of every christian to make direct efforts with reference to this end, and to make them frequently, and to persevere in making them, is surely a point too obvious to require proof ; but it is equally certain that, in order to secure to them their legitimate influence, they must be accompanied by an exemplary daily deportment. I have known men—and who has not known them ?—who have done much less by direct efforts for the salvation of sinners than I could have wished, who were nevertheless so unexceptionable in the general tenor of their lives, so

humble and conscientious, so upright, and charitable, and forgiving, that though their influence was noiseless as the dew, there was still an energy in it which made it deeply and extensively felt. They were an epistle known and read of all men ; and even infidelity itself could not come within the atmosphere which surrounded them, without feeling itself impressively, though silently, rebuked.

Without intending to present any thing like a complete directory in regard to this important field of christian duty, I will suggest a few hints which may help some professors to more faithful self-examination, and may excite all who contemplate them to greater watchfulness in respect to their every day deportment. I would say to every professing christian,

1. *See to it that your intercourse with the world is never characterized by the spirit of exaggeration.* It would seem that, in many minds, there is a constitutional tendency to this ;—a disposition to deal in the marvellous at the expense of sober verity. And it must be acknowledged that some professors of religion are unguarded in this respect, to a degree which subjects even their christian character to suspicion. They may not indeed utter things in which there is no semblance of reality ; but their imagination throws around the sober fact so much imposing drapery, that the impression which is communicated is palpably false ; and besides, there is always reason to fear from the nature of habit, that the man who indulges a passion for exaggeration, will, from making a large story out of scanty materials, gradually acquire the power of conjuring up the materials themselves. Oh how cutting it is to hear worldly men say of a professor of religion the moment his

back is turned—" that man's statements are to be received with caution. What he says *may* be true ; but there is nothing in his character to convey any assurance of it."

Beware then of the very beginning of such a habit. Be sure that all your statements are conformed to the literal verity. Remember that if you are professedly engaged in narrating facts, you cannot call imagination to your aid but at the expense of truth. If you speak on subjects concerning which you are in doubt, see that the impression you convey is exactly conformed to your honest views ; and that you do not appear to be confident when you are really doubtful. In this way you will leave upon the world a delightful impression of that godly simplicity which the gospel enjoins ; but, by a different course, you will certainly subject yourself to the imputation of being deficient in one of the cardinal moral virtues.

2. *Let all your pecuniary transactions be marked by the strictest honesty.* The least departure from this in a professing christian is sure to draw upon him the eyes, and open the lips, of all who are willing to see religion prostrate and bleeding in the house of her friends. Let it be said that a professor has failed in business under circumstances which reflect greatly upon his integrity ; or that he has over-reached and defrauded his neighbor in any pecuniary transaction ; or that he has endeavored to take an undue advantage, even though he may not have succeeded in it ; and there are a multitude who will charge this to the religion of the gospel with as much confidence as if she were a living personage walking about the earth on errands of deception. 'Here,' it is said, 'is a specimen of the purifying influence of christianity : a man who be-

longs to the church, and it may be, stands high in it, can nevertheless sacrifice conscience, principle, every thing, for the love of money !' What an argument this with an inconsiderate mind, already seeking apologies for the neglect of religion, for dismissing the whole subject, and sinking down into a habit of still deeper carelessness !

I once knew a man who was not only professedly a christian, but a christian of uncommon zeal and devotedness ; who yet, in the course of time proved himself one of the most desperate knaves I ever heard of. There was no external religious service which he was not ready to perform : in the sabbath school, in the prayer meeting, in the social religious circle, no man was more active than he ; and there was nothing in his exterior to indicate that his heart was not in it. But during this whole time, as it proved, he was devising and executing plans marked by the basest fraud ; and he scrupled not to violate every consideration of honor and friendship ; and even his relation to the church was not too sacred to be perverted to purposes of unjust gain. At length circumstances occurred which brought his character into suspicion ; and forthwith there was a disclosure which almost electrified the community in which he resided ; and it appeared, beyond all contradiction, that there was nothing for which dishonesty was the qualification, which he was not capable of doing.— I know not whether he ever shed any tears of penitence in view of his conduct ; but I know that many christians felt the stirrings of a spirit of compassion towards him, while they were ready to weep at the deep wound he had inflicted on their Master's cause. I know too that the voice of reproach was heard, not against him alone, but against the religion which he had professed ; and more

than one infidel indulged in the language of insulting triumph, as if this were a pledge that the funeral of christianity herself would not long be delayed.

Be it that this is an extraordinary case—yet unhappily not so extraordinary, but there is a large class of cases which are fairly represented by it ;—but is there not more or less of dishonesty often discoverable in the conduct of professors who would revolt at the suspicion of their being capable of studied fraud ? Are there not many who, in their pecuniary transactions, allow themselves to take undue advantage of the necessities of their fellow men ; overlooking the golden rule of doing to others as we would that they should do to us ? Do they not offer apologies to their own consciences for doing unjustly, which they would not admit, for a moment, in reference to others ? And is there not reason to fear that some who allow themselves an undue degree of latitude in this particular, think to atone for any moral obliquity with which conscience may charge them, by exhibiting a proportionally greater degree of zeal in the things of religion ? I doubt not that many a man deceives himself, and perhaps fatally, by this very means ;—playing a trick with his conscience by practising dishonesty in the world, and virtually doing penance for it in the church.

Hitherto, under this article, I have confined my remarks to that species of dishonesty which is more immediately connected with pecuniary transactions ; but I cannot forbear to add that there are professed christians who would never think of stooping so low as to cheat a man in a bargain, who, nevertheless, in their common intercourse with their fellow men, are governed too much by a spirit of worldly policy. There are some men who

seem averse to treading in any beaten track, even though it happens to be in the path of virtue and wisdom ; and instead of arriving at an end by a plain and honest course of means which every body would understand, they move in a mysterious way, and make you feel perhaps that their hand is upon you when you do not see it. A spirit of management seems to be a leading element in their constitution ; and it comes into exercise on every occasion ; insomuch that, after a while, their whole course of conduct is determined, in a great measure, by considerations of mere expediency. Not that they will set at naught in theory any of the great principles of morality, or that they are always sensible to what extent they violate these principles in practice ; but the habit of balancing between considerations of present loss and gain, has led them to think too little of the higher considerations of right and wrong ; and while they admit the obligation of every moral precept in the bible, they make it painfully manifest that neither the letter nor the spirit of these precepts *always* controls their conduct.

Now I am constrained to believe that this kind of policy in *any* person is exceedingly ill-judged and worse than profitless. Because, in the first place, it involves a great waste of time and thought ; for, in most instances, a deep laid plan is the result of considerable intellectual labor ; and if the object to be accomplished, could be gained as well by open and honest means, it is manifest that the time and labor which have been expended, have been absolutely lost ; no other good having resulted than the pleasure of walking in a concealed path. And if the object could *not* be gained by a palpably fair and honest instrumentalitv, it may well be questioned whether it ought to be gain-

ed at all. But in addition to this, the individual who adopts such a course, even admitting that many of his plans succeed to the extent of his wishes, sustains an incalculable loss of influence, by the suspicion he awakens respecting his integrity. The consequence is that his best friends are afraid of him ; for they cannot tell but that policy may prevail even over friendship. And as for the mass of those whom he would wish to influence, his known character keeps them in the attitude of suspicion ; and even when he proposes an end which may seem perfectly proper and desirable, they may not improbably hesitate to co-operate with him, lest he should have in his eye some ulterior end to which they would be unwilling to give their influence.

But if this extreme policy be after all impolitic, as well as reprehensible, in *any* man, what shall be said of it in one who professes to have learned his rules of conduct from him in whose lips there was no guile ? I will not undertake to decide how far an individual may go in this course of artful dealing, and still have a renewed heart ; but sure I am that, just in proportion as any professor departs from the plain and open path of christian integrity, while he lessens his influence and usefulness with the world, he brings a reproach upon religion, and a cloud over his own character. I do not say that a man may not err greatly in this respect, and yet be saved ; but is there not reason to believe that he will be saved so as by fire ?

I say then, professing Christian, in every situation hold fast your integrity. Never yield to a temptation to practise fraud even on the smallest scale, or in respect to the most unimportant matter ; for he that is unjust in that

which is least will soon be unjust in much ; besides that the principle involved in each case is the same.— Avoid even the appearance of this evil ; and consent to make great sacrifices rather than subject yourself to a suspicion of having yielded to it. For the moment your character comes to be extensively suspected, your christian influence is at an end. You may talk to the unrenewed sinner then as much as you will in respect to the salvation of his soul, and if he does not laugh you to scorn, he will turn away from you and call you a hypocrite.— And whatever efforts you may make for the conversion of men, will all be neutralized, and more, by your having a low character in the world for moral honesty.— ‘ Oh,’ said a man of the world concerning a professor, of equivocal integrity, and yet of high pretensions, ‘ If I were to judge of him in the prayer meeting, I should think he was a saint just ripe for heaven : if I were to judge of him in the counting room, I should say that he was any thing but an honest man.’

3. *Cultivate a noble and generous spirit.* I do not mean to intimate that a christian is not at liberty to claim his reasonable dues ; or that he may not fairly insist, in his intercourse with the world as a man of business, that the acknowledged principles of honorable dealing should be adhered to : nor do I intend that a man is bound, in virtue of his christian profession, or any thing else, to contribute to good objects beyond his real ability ; or that he is forbidden to have a proper respect to his own personal wants, or to make some provision for those who may be dependant upon him. So far from this, if the christian were tamely and habitually to submit to imposition from those with whom he associates, it would serve only to

encourage them in evil doing ; and as for taking care of himself and those who are committed to his charge, there is the united voice of Providence and Inspiration in favor of it ; and he who neglects it, violates at once the most obvious dictates of reason, and the plainest precepts of the bible.

But while it is the christian's privilege, in prosecuting his secular concerns, to claim that the rules of fair and honorable business should be properly regarded, and while he has not only a right, but is bound, to regulate his expenses and his charities with reference to the circumstances in which Providence has placed him, and the number who are dependant upon him, there is a mean and penurious spirit which ought never to find a place in his bosom for an hour. It must be acknowledged that there are some professed christians, who, though they may not absolutely be liable to the charge of dishonesty, are so much under the influence of an avaricious spirit, that you might as well appeal to the rocks or the winds in behalf of any object of charity as to attempt to procure from them the smallest contribution. They hoard up property, as it would seem, for no other purpose than to gratify the passion for accumulating it. In your intercourse with them, perhaps you are not afraid of being actually cheated, but you are sure they will insist upon the very closest bargain ; and if, by mistake, they have received a penny too little, it will haunt them as a mighty loss. Oh how these men incumber and dishonor the church ! No matter what amount of property they may have, every demand that is made upon them for charity is met by the plea of poverty, or the plea of numerous calls, or the plea of

having a family to provide for, or something else which may suffice as an apology for evading the claim.

But there are instances in which good men fall into a habit, not merely of frugality, but of penuriousness, with a view to be able to give more for the cause of Christ.—They not only greatly retrench their own personal expenses, which, in many cases at least, is highly commendable, but manifest in their intercourse with the world a spirit of parsimonious exactness which causes their good to be evil spoken of. I would most sincerely honor and encourage every honest desire to advance the Redeemer's cause ; but in the case to which I have here referred, I cannot doubt that whatever advantage may be gained, is gained at an expense which more than neutralizes it. The christian who stoops to a dishonorable action, with a view to save something to consecrate even to the best of causes, is almost certain to lose more in influence than he will gain in money. The world will look closely at the act, but will overlook the motive ; and notwithstanding the Searcher of his heart sees that his conduct is dictated by a sincere desire to do good, the effect will inevitably be that his character will suffer, and his means of usefulness be proportionally abridged.

Take heed then, Christian, that you never allow yourself in an act which the world can, with any show of reason, call dishonorable. It is the tendency of the gospel to enlarge the heart ; to cherish an enlightened public spirit ; to extend the circle of our affections and regards ; and to raise men above the influence of a grovelling selfishness. How painful is it then to have the character of a professed christian put in contrast with that of a mere man of the world, with a view to illustrate

the noble and disinterested spirit of the latter, and the mean and niggardly disposition of the former ! And yet it cannot be denied that some men, who make no pretensions to piety, do, from a constitutionally noble spirit, commend themselves to the gratitude and respect of their fellow men ; while others, who are professedly living under the practical influence of christianity, from the prevalence of a naturally avaricious and illiberal disposition which religion has very imperfectly subdued, subject themselves to the imputation of meanness, and even to expressions of contempt. Take care, Christian, that your own character in this respect is such as will bear not only to be brought into comparison with that of the most benevolent of the men of the world, but also to be referred to as a practical illustration of the ennobling spirit of the gospel. No matter how poor you may be—though you may have to work for your daily bread, or even be dependant on the charity of friends, you may still show that you have a generous spirit, and are incapable of a mean action.

4. *Guard against an austere and forbidding deportment.* I have alluded to this already, as one of the hindrances to the intercourse of christians with each other ; and it is still more pernicious in its influence upon the un-renewed world. Let a professor move about among them, showing himself always under the influence of an artificial gravity ; let them rarely see him with the smile of innocent cheerfulness, or receive from him the warm greeting of a friend ; let him be indifferent in a great measure to the ordinary courtesies of life, as if, because religion is concerned with more important interests, she, of course, lays a cold hand upon all our social enjoyments ;

and whatever the truth may be in respect to him, he will almost inevitably acquire with the world the character of a hypocrite ; and they will point to his long face, his studied reserve, and his precise gait, as evidence of it. It often happens that men of this cast of character are exceedingly ready to warn sinners of their danger, and urge them to repentance ; but they labor under a disadvantage in two respects ;—the individuals whom they would wish to influence, in consequence of the repulsiveness of their manner, usually take good care to keep out of their way ; and even if they gain access to their persons, they have an iron shield of prejudice to penetrate before they can reach their hearts. No doubt men of this description often assume this unfortunate manner, partly for the purpose that they may, by an appearance of greater spirituality, more effectually impress the hearts of the unrenewed ; but never was there a greater mistake. It is the very course which is best adapted to defeat the end they wish to accomplish ; and what increases the evil is, that they not only close the door of usefulness against themselves, but in many instances at least, by the unlovely character which they practically give to religion, prevent all hope of good from the efforts of other and more judicious christians.

Make it an object then, Christian, in all your intercourse with the world, to let religion appear in her own attractive loveliness. Never assume an artificial air of austerity ; never say even by a look or an attitude, ‘Stand by, I am holier than thou ;’ never make yourself needlessly offensive in any circle into which you are thrown ; but while you take care that your cheerfulness does not degenerate into levity, still be cheerful : while you are cau-

tious that you do not sacrifice christian principle to worldly civility, still pay a due respect to the proprieties of social intercourse. You are to do this, not only because it is right in itself, and is clearly enjoined by the spirit of the gospel, but because such a course is essential to your highest usefulness. While the general impression which it leaves upon the world is favorable to religion, it will constitute a happy preparation for those direct personal appeals to the heart and conscience, which every christian is bound to make, as he has opportunity, in reference to the salvation of his fellow men.

5. *Always appear with dignity and decorum.* If this is important in the intercourse which christians have with each other, as I have already attempted to show, it is still more so in the intercourse they have with the world.— And yet perhaps there is scarcely a point in respect to which the tone of religious character needs to be elevated more than this : and they who are constitutionally of a very cheerful and excitable temperament are more exposed here than any others. What faithful christian is there, whose heart has not bled, at seeing persons whom he is accustomed to meet at the communion table, so far forgetting the obligations of their profession, as to mingle with the world in the spirit of unrestrained levity, if not of actual buffoonery ; insomuch that, in some instances, they have scarcely kept to the decencies of worldly intercourse ? No tongue can describe the evil which every such professor brings upon the cause of Christ. If it is possible that such an one should ever *wish* to commune with the consciences of unrenewed men in respect to their salvation, yet would he *dare* to do it, when the levity of his daily deportment is constantly proclaiming to them

that he has drank as deeply into the spirit of the world as themselves ?

I am speaking here, it will be recollected, merely of the mistakes of christians in their intercourse with worldly men in the common business of life : and sure I am that the levity which characterizes this, independently of that which is often exhibited in mixed circles, is fraught with deep injury. Indeed there are, no doubt, individuals who never mingle at all in the gay scenes of fashionable life, who yet, by a habit of inconsiderate jesting and trifling in their daily intercourse, accomplish for themselves and others the most serious evil. Beware, professing Christian, that this does not prove to be your own ease ; that while you are prevented by scruples of conscience, or as the case may be, by want of inclination, from ever being found in those scenes of amusement and dissipation to which so many are attracted, you do not actually incur equal guilt by yielding to the same spirit, in a more private, yet perhaps in an habitual, way.

6. *Never yield to a rash and irritable spirit.* I know that some persons have greatly the advantage over others in respect to the original power of self-control ; but no apology can be offered for any one, and especially for any christian, who does not keep in subjection his own spirit. If you are constituted with an original propensity to be rash, and your spirit easily kindles into resentment, however momentary, this surely is a reason why you should guard this part of your moral nature with double vigilance ;—why you should subject yourself to a constant course of discipline till you have learned the art of keeping reason always at helm even in the most violent storm of provocation. For the injury which a professor of reli-

gion does to the cause of Christ, by the unrestrained indulgence of an irritable temper, it may often be beyond his power to retrieve. He may go out and weep bitterly over his unguarded conduct, and may actually have the spirit of Peter under the influence of that dissolving and recovering look which his Lord gave him ; and may have in his own experience abundant evidence that his transgression has been forgiven ; and after all he may be compelled to reflect that there are evil consequences resulting from what he has done, which it is utterly impossible for him to arrest. He may have opened the mouth of many a scoffer to revile the name of his beloved Master ; he may have inflicted a deep wound upon the hearts of many of his brethren in Christ ; and the cause of Jesus may actually lie bleeding through his instrumentality ; when all that he can do is to acknowledge and lament his error, and humble himself before God and man, in view of his having committed it.

If you are naturally of an irritable temperament, and yet make no special effort in the way of self-control, you will not only be liable under the influence of excited feeling to make work for bitter repentance, but you will be in jeopardy in this respect every hour that you live ; for let it once be known that this is your vulnerable point, and there will be enough to take advantage of it by assailing you with unkind provocations, that they may triumph in your weakness, and rashness, and folly.

Resolve then that, under all circumstances of provocation and insult, you will maintain a proper self command, and will never let go for a moment the dignity of the christian. Not that you are bound in any case to indulge a servile and cringing spirit, or forbidden to protect your

own rights in a proper manner when they are wantonly invaded ; but you are to cultivate the forgiving and forbearing temper of the gospel, and to remember the words of the Lord Jesus, when he said, ‘ Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you and persecute you.’

I put it to you now, Christian, whether, in view of the preceding remarks, you can say that your intercourse with the world hitherto in the common concerns of life, has been such as to secure the honest approbation of your conscience ? In your statements have you taken care to adhere to the simple verity, never suffering imagination to do the office of memory ? Have you been strictly and uniformly honest in your dealings ; not only rendering to every one his dues in all pecuniary transactions, but in every other respect, showing yourself always on the high ground of honor and integrity ? Have you been careful to cultivate a noble and generous spirit ; making it manifest every where that you are above a mean action ?—Have you avoided an austere and distant manner on the one hand, and a vain and undignified manner on the other ? Have you disciplined your own spirit, so as not to be blown about by every breath of provocation ; and can you stand coolly and exercise a forgiving temper, even amidst reproaches and insults ? If, with a good conscience, you can answer these questions in the affirmative, you are certainly in some important particulars, causing your light to shine before men. There are indeed other duties which you owe to the world which have not here been contemplated ; but if, in these respects, you are faithful, it is reasonable to hope that your character will be form-

ed by an adherence to *all* the precepts of the gospel.— If you are conscious of having been remiss in any, or all, of the particulars that have been mentioned, let the future find you more conscientious, watchful, and faithful.— Thus will you keep yourself in some good degree from the guilt of being a stumbling block to your fellow men, and will present before them continually a bright and living illustration of the power and value of the gospel.

## CHAPTER II.

### THE CHRISTIAN'S INTERCOURSE WITH THE WORLD IN THE SOCIAL CIRCLE.

I am not ignorant of the fact that there are many excellent people, who, in the strong desire they have felt that they might keep themselves unspotted from the world, have gone to an extreme of seclusion from mixed society, which, while it has served to invest religion itself with gloom, has interfered not a little with their own general usefulness. The presence of half a dozen individuals who were indifferent to religion, in any social circle into which they have fallen, has been looked upon at once as a signal for alarm ; and whenever any of their fellow christians have been found in similar circumstances, even though there may not have been the least departure from rigid propriety in any thing that has been said or done, they have been ready to charge them with a gross violation of their obligations, and a criminal conformity to the world.

That this is an error must, I think, be apparent to any one who contemplates the design of Providence in giving us a social nature, or his arrangement in bringing the good and the bad together in the various relations of life, or, I may add, the general spirit, or the particular precepts, of christianity. Let this principle once be adopted and carried out to its legitimate results, and it is easy to see

that confusion and discord would triumph, and the fabric of society be well nigh subverted.

There are two objects which may very properly bring christians and the world together in a social circle, even where it is understood that the meeting is not to be directly and chiefly of a religious character. The one is *the improvement of the intellect*. This end may sometimes be gained by reading ; where some instructive and useful book is made to minister to the edification of a whole circle. Or it may be gained by conversation, either of a more general or more particular kind. There may be a discussion of some important subject between two individuals of the company, to which all the rest shall listen ; or else they may all engage in conversation—different subjects occupying the attention of different individuals—it being always understood that the subject is adapted to quicken and improve the faculties. There is one important advantage which an animated conversation has, in respect to the culture of the mind, above a train of private reflection: it is that, in the former case, mind sharpens mind ; and the consequence is that bold, and brilliant, and useful, thoughts are often struck out by means of this contact of intellect, which otherwise would not have had an existence ; and besides, who does not know that vigorous exercise contributes to the health of the intellectual, as truly as of the bodily, system ? Surely then there can be no objection, if the culture of the intellect be an object of importance, as no one will question, to the mingling of professors of religion with those who are not, with reference to this end ; provided always there be nothing in their intercourse unfriendly to the interests of practical piety.

The other object to which I referred is *the culture of the social affections*. That this is a legitimate object may be fairly inferred from the fact that these affections belong essentially to our nature ; and it were unreasonable to suppose that Providence should have constituted us with them, if he had not designed that, in common with every other original endowment, they should be subjected to a proper cultivation. Besides, who does not see that they are designed to answer most important purposes in our constitution, and that their legitimate exercise is connected with a large part both of our happiness and usefulness ? If any one should say that, though it is doubtless proper that the social affections should be cultivated, yet christians should do this by mingling exclusively with each other ; I would ask him for his warrant for this, either in the genius of christianity, or in any of its particular precepts, or in the indications of Providence as they are developed in the constitution of human society ? They are indeed bound to take heed that, in their intercourse with the world, they do not cultivate the social affections, at the expense of obscuring their christian graces ; but if they do the former and avoid the latter, who will say that nothing of good has been accomplished ?

Let no one say that the objects I have mentioned are insufficient to justify the christian in meeting in the social circle those who make no pretensions to religion, inasmuch as they seem to look chiefly or entirely to the interests of this present world. For this world, let it be remembered, has its importance ; and there is nothing in religion which requires that it should be overlooked. Certainly it is not the chief concern ;—so far from it that,

when brought into comparison with a future and eternal state, it dwindleth to insignificance : but after all, he who placed us in it designed that it should occupy a share of our attention ; and we all recognise this fact in the common concerns of life. With just as much propriety might it be urged that christians ought to have nothing to do with worldly men in their efforts to procure their daily bread, on the ground that this object is not to be brought into comparison with the salvation of the soul, as that the former should never mingle with the latter in a social circle, because the culture of the intellectual powers and social feelings is incomparably less important than that “ holiness, without which no man can see the Lord.”

But because the objects which christians propose in this intercourse with the world relate *immediately* to the life that now is, it by no means follows that they do not have an *ultimate* and highly important reference to that which is to come. Be it so that the faculties are employed, on such occasions, in investigating the great principles of science, or on other subjects of mere secular import ; yet who will say that the vigor which may thereby be imparted to the intellect both of the christian and the man of the world, may not be rendered subservient to the great interests of Christ’s kingdom ? Admit that the knowledge which has been communicated and received, has had respect to nothing more important than the progress of intellectual light, or the means of advancing the cause of education ;—yet is it not reasonable to suppose that this may be rendered tributary, in many ways, to extending the influence of the gospel ? And suppose no higher feeling brought into exercise, on the

part of those who are unrenewed, than that of kindness and good will towards the professors of religion with whom they associate ; provided the latter do not, in any way, dishonor their christian profession, who can say that they may not accomplish incalculable good by preparing the way for a direct approach to the conscience on the most momentous of all subjects ? Rely on it, the christian who has the greatest advantage in bringing home the subject of personal religion to the heart of an unrenewed sinner, is not he whom that individual never sees except in the discharge of his more spiritual duties ; but it is the man who meets him freely in other circumstances, and converses with him on topics of general interest, and thus wins his confidence, and predisposes him to lend an ear to serious counsels and admonitions. I can imagine that a professor of religion may meet a careless friend in a social circle, and not a word pass between them in respect to the grand concerns of eternity ; and yet the interview may have a most important connexion with that sinner's final salvation ; for it may be the means of preparing the way for other conversations in which divine truth shall be brought home to the conscience, not only with convincing but sanctifying efficacy.

In the case to which I now refer, that is, where those who profess religion, and those who do not, are met for purposes of general intercourse, I do not suppose that *direct* religious conversation should, under all circumstances, be attempted ; and it were especially ill-judged for any professor to address an individual on the subject of his salvation abruptly, and with so loud a voice as to be heard, and intentionally heard, by the rest of the company. I have known several cases of this, but never

knew one which resulted favorably. Nevertheless, instances frequently occur in which the kind of intercourse of which I am speaking, furnishes a good opportunity for dropping a word of christian counsel on the ear of an irreligious friend, and even of pressing his conscience with the most awakening considerations. I knew a case, not long ago, in which a clergyman was introduced, in a large circle, to a young lady whose condition in life was extremely unfavorable to every thing like serious reflection ; and yet he happened to know that she was not a stranger to it. After conversing with her, a few moments, on general topics, he introduced, with great delicacy and good judgment, the subject of religion ; and instead of being shocked or disgusted, she was gratified beyond measure ; and there is reason to hope that that brief interview may have been blessed to her eternal salvation. There was nothing occurring around them which rendered such conversation, in any degree, incongruous ; for though there was the cheerfulness of a well regulated social intercourse, there was nothing of unhallowed or undignified levity. Professing christians then need not despair of making this general intercourse with the world directly subservient to the purposes of religion. Let them take advantage of suitable opportunities, on the one hand, and not imagine that there are opportunities when there are not, on the other, and they may hope frequently to reach the heart with instructions and counsels, which may be of lasting spiritual advantage.

But while the christian may very properly associate with the world in the manner, and for the purposes, I have mentioned, and with the hope of being positively useful, there *are* social scenes sometimes unhappily con-

founded with those just referred to, in which it is scarcely possible for him to mingle, without putting in jeopardy not his own character and comfort only, but the best interests of religion. I refer to those scenes which are designed merely as an exhibition of the pride of life ; in which, though there may be nothing positively immoral, in the common acceptation of the word, yet there is nothing to benefit the understanding or the heart ;— scenes of vapid conversation, and ostentatious parade, and thoughtless gaiety, and foolish amusement ; in which those who are averse to all serious reflection, expect to find, and actually do find, all the means of killing time made ready at their hands. I do not mean that, in such a scene as that to which I now refer, every individual who is present is of course an equal sharer in the levity and folly by which it is marked : on the contrary, it is very supposable that there may be those who are not interested in it at all, and whose conduct is, in every respect, discreet and decorous ;—I only mean that the controlling influence is such as I have described. Notwithstanding the few whose deportment may be marked by nothing exceptionable, the spirit of levity still predominates ; and while the serious christian, if perchance he has been there, has found himself in an atmosphere which he could not breathe with freedom, the mere child of thoughtlessness and folly has felt that he was in the very element in which his soul most delighted.

Let it not be supposed that the evil of which I speak depends entirely on the *number* who are brought together. Other things being equal, there is certainly a greater probability of irregularity and excess in a large circle than in a small one ; because the exciting influences are likely

to be more powerful with the many than the few ; and besides, the sense of responsibility is apt to diminish, as the number of those who share it increases. At the same time, it does not *necessarily* follow from the fact that a large number are assembled, that there should be any thing in which a christian may not very consistently participate ; nor, on the other hand, can it be fairly inferred from the fact that there are but few, that there will not be gross violations of christian propriety and even ordinary decorum. I have known instances in which a large and somewhat promiscuous collection have passed an evening in edifying conversation, and without any infringement of the strictest proprieties of life, and, before they separated, have unitedly supplicated the blessing of God on their intercourse ; and I have known other cases in which but half a dozen, or even a smaller number, have been together, and so vain and foolish have been the conversation and amusements, that no christian could have joined in them, but at an expense both of conscience and character. I repeat then, though the number to be brought together is certainly an important consideration, in estimating the probability of evil connected with such an occasion, yet it is by no means the *only* consideration ; and it ought always to be looked at in connexion with other things—particularly with the prevailing character of those who are to constitute the assemblage. It is reasonable to presume that persons who are known to be lovers of pleasure, especially if they are assembled in considerable numbers, and constitute the majority in the circle, will break through no small restraints, if need be, to indulge their ruling passion ; and hence it is that an individual who gives out an invitation which em-

braces a large number of the votaries of gaiety, puts it in a great measure out of his power to give such a complexion to the occasion as he might desire ; for while the majority would practically assert their claim to rule, he would be prevented by courtesy from protesting against any thing which was not grossly offensive. But if the greater number are persons who would be inclined to edifying and profitable conversation, it may reasonably be expected that the controlling influence will be of a useful kind ; and the presumption is that nothing will occur, which a christian need hesitate by his presence to sanction.

As this subject is one of practical interest with most professors, especially in the higher walks of life, and as it is confessedly exceedingly difficult, in many cases, to ascertain the path of duty in regard to it, I will here suggest two or three considerations with a view to aid christians in respect to this important matter.

In the first place then, inquire of your own conscience, in respect to any particular scene of social enjoyment to which you are invited, *whether, by mingling in it, you will be likely, on the whole, to do any good?* Have you reason to believe that your presence there will leave an impression favorable to the religion you profess ? Can you reasonably expect that there will be any opportunity, either directly or indirectly, to bear testimony to the excellence of the gospel ? Or can you expect that your intercourse with those who are indifferent to religion, in the circumstances in which you will be placed, will subsequently render your access to them more easy, when you would approach them on the subject of their soul's salvation ? Or can you hope to impart any thing that is really useful ;

or to secure any influence which you may be able afterwards to turn to a good account ? Or, on the other hand, do you honestly believe that you will be placed in a situation in which you can do nothing for the benefit of those with whom you mingle ; that your presence will encourage them in that which is in itself wrong, and which probably constitutes the chief obstacle to their salvation ? And do you believe that meeting them in these circumstances will rather embarrass than assist you, in any subsequent effort you may choose to make, to impress them with the obligations of religion ? Or if you have reason to hope that you might do *some* good, have you not reason to fear that you might do *more* harm, so that, on the whole, your presence would be of evil tendency ? If these latter questions must be answered in the affirmative, I need not say that your duty is plain. You have no right even to let your good be evil spoken of : much less have you a right to do that which is in itself evil, and which you honestly believe must result in injury to your fellow creatures.

You may inquire again, *whether you will be likely to get any good ?* Will the legitimate purpose of amusement be answered, by refreshing your exhausted faculties, and preparing them for more vigorous effort ; or will there be a dissipation of thought, not to say a weariness of body, induced, which will prepare you for at least one day of lassitude and inaction ? Will you be likely to gain any knowledge which will aid you in the prosecution of any good object, or improve and elevate your intellectual character ? Or will the current probably set so strongly in favor of the vanities and fripperies of life, that you will hear little or nothing which you would

wish to remember? Can you with any reason expect that there will be any thing to awaken a spirit of devotion, and impress you more deeply with eternal realities; or is it reasonable to conclude that what you would witness would relax your spiritual sensibility, and unfit you for the duty of prayer, and possibly lay the foundation of a habit of wretched conformity to the world? Here again, I am sure, you may very properly be guided by the answer which an enlightened conscience gives to these questions.

But inquire farther, *whether the scene in which you are invited to mingle is likely to be one on which you can ask the blessing of God?* With the expectation which you are obliged to form in regard to it, dare you go into your closet and ask God to bless your attendance there not only to yourself but to others? And do you really believe that after it is over, you shall be able to return to your closet, and supplicate God to follow it with his blessing? If you feel that there would be something incongruous in this, it is an evidence that your conscience is not clear in respect to it: of course it is manifestly your duty to decline. Christians are required to acknowledge God in *all* their ways; and if there be any thing proposed to them, in regard to which they cannot conscientiously acknowledge him by supplicating his favor, it must be at their peril that they engage in it.

And finally, ask yourself *what decision on the subject will be likely to yield you most satisfaction in review on the bed of death?* Will it seem better to you then that these hours had been spent in the social circle to which you are solicited, or in your closet, or in your family, or in carrying blessings to the wretched and destitute? If

the occasion be in itself such as to justify your attendance, you need not anticipate a painful review of it in your last hour ; but if you feel now that you would greatly prefer that it should not come into remembrance then, it is manifest that you cannot yield, but at the expense of doing violence to your own conscience. On the bed of death there will probably be so much light from eternity let in upon your soul, that you will see things as they are, and estimate them in some degree as they do who have passed within the vail. I say again, send this question forward for decision to your dying bed ; and you need have no fear but that the answer which comes back to you, will be approved by your eternal Judge.

But I am aware there is a difficulty which lies beyond that I have been considering : you may easily enough form general rules for the regulation of your conduct in this respect, and yet it may be no easy matter to apply them to all particular cases : you may satisfy yourself how far you can go in consistency with a good conscience and a christian profession, and yet you may be unable to determine whether the particular scene in which you are invited to mingle, will come within the limits which your own sense of duty has prescribed. In many cases indeed you can have no doubt ; for every circumstance shows that, as a christian, you have no right to be there. But in many other cases you may very reasonably hesitate in respect to the path of duty ; and it may aid you to a right decision to consider the character of the person from whom the invitation comes ; for whether he is devoted to the pleasures of this world or the higher interests of another, it is reasonable to expect that he has made arrangements for passing the evening in a manner

somewhat in keeping with his own prevailing propensities. And then again, you may be assisted still farther in determining your duty by considering, if it happens to be known to you, the number and character of the invited guests; for you may rest assured that, while persons of sobriety and reflection may be expected to act in character on such an occasion, there cannot be a large collection of the gay and thoughtless, but that there will be much in which the consistent christian will feel no desire to participate.

In all ordinary cases in which you are not tolerably satisfied that every thing will be conducted with decorum, and to some useful end, no doubt your duty requires that you should decline the invitation. But in all cases in which you accept an invitation, you are to go with a deep sense of your responsibility and your danger, and in humble dependance on the influence of God's grace to enable you to honor and recommend the religion you profess.

If there be any case in which a professor of religion could be justified in departing from the general rule laid down in this chapter, so far as to resort occasionally to places in which the gaieties of the world are suffered to triumph, I should say it was that of an individual who was travelling with a view to make minute observations on the manners and habits of the people, which he might turn to some useful account. But even in this case, he should beware that his spirituality does not decline under a worldly influence. If I mistake not, the history of many professors of religion, and even ministers of the gospel, who have travelled for a considerable time in foreign countries, and especially on the continent of Europe, furnishes a striking illustration of the importance of this

caution. Let every one who is placed in such circumstances use the utmost vigilance and care that he keep himself unspotted from the world. Let him take heed lest the unchristian practices which he allows himself to witness, should appear less odious, in proportion as they become familiar ; and thus, in the effort which he makes to acquire a more extended knowledge of the world, he should sacrifice that which is of far greater importance—a deep religious sensibility, and a faithful adherence to all the duties of the christian life.

## CHAPTER III.

### CONSIDERATIONS PROHIBITING THE CHRISTIAN FROM THE GAIETIES OF THE WORLD.

I have endeavored in the preceding chapter to discriminate as accurately as I could, between that intercourse with the world in the social circle which a christian may consistently maintain, and that which is prohibited by his profession and obligations. I am aware, however, that there is here great room for the exercise of wisdom in the application of the right general principles ; and that many who are professedly right in theory, are exceedingly wrong in practice. And it cannot be concealed that there are many others belonging to the church, who seem to have no rule on the subject, other than to avail themselves of every opportunity that presents itself, to plunge into the gaieties of fashionable life. In the former case, the evil is to be referred principally to the want of due decision ; in the latter, there is reason to fear that it has its origin in a heart that is really in love with the vanities of the world, and has never been disciplined to the self denial of the gospel. It cannot, therefore, I think, be a matter of question with any one who is conversant with facts on this subject, whether there is not good reason for admonishing the church in general against the evil which is here contemplated.

Let me request, however, that it may be distinctly borne in mind, that I am not proscribing every thing that may happen to go under the name of a *party*, but only *such* parties as have been described in the preceding chapter, as of unprofitable and injurious tendency. And that I may be sure of being understood, I will say again, that I mean those which, however free they may be from the grossness of open vice, are yet designed chiefly to furnish an opportunity for a vain show, and an appropriate element for mirth and gaiety ;—scenes in which it is understood that the spirit of worldly levity is to have the predominant influence, and in which a christian cannot mingle without laying aside his religious character, on the one hand, or exhibiting a spirit which is felt to be most inappropriate to the occasion, on the other. No doubt there will be a difference of opinion among professors in respect to the question, to what particular occasions these remarks are applicable: my own conviction is, that they apply to very many of the mixed circles in what is commonly called fashionable life ; though I would have every professing christian decide the point for himself, only keeping in view the fact that his decision is to control him in a most important part of his conduct.

I will endeavor, under several particulars, to illustrate the **EVIL** which is likely to result from a christian's mingling in the gay scenes of the fashionable world ; or in any social circle in which thoughtlessness and levity are to have the controlling influence. My remarks will apply indiscriminately to the professor who gives the invitation, and to the one who accepts it.

In general I would say that the evil of such a course consists in ITS TENDENCY TO INJURE THE CAUSE OF CHRIST. More particularly,

I. It injures THE INDIVIDUAL WHO ADOPTS IT.

1. Admitting that he is a true christian, it obscures his *evidences*. The evidence of one's piety is to be derived from a careful inspection of one's own heart and life.— Of course there can be no *real* evidence of that which does not exist ; though there may be, and often is, that which is mistaken for evidence : if, therefore, an individual has but a small amount of piety ; if the growth of his christian affections is, in a great measure, choked by the influence of the world, it is impossible that he should have, in his own experience, any testimony to a high degree of sanctification. And besides, just in proportion to his decline in spirituality, the evidence of his having any piety at all becomes equivocal ; for the existence of a principle of spiritual life is to be known only by its operations ; and where those operations are extremely feeble and irregular, it is difficult to distinguish them from the exercise of other principles, which belong essentially to human nature. An individual may have the grace of God in his heart, and yet it may be like a grain of mustard seed ; and it may be sadly checked in its growth by the prevalence of a worldly spirit ; but if he will gain a clear and satisfying evidence that he possesses it, he must cultivate it by all the means in his power, and be able to see the fruit of it in a life according to godliness.

Now I am sure that every one who reflects a moment, must be satisfied that no individual can accustom himself to mingle in the gaieties of the world, and yet retain that high degree of spirituality which is essential even to a

tolerably satisfactory evidence of christian character.— That a professor should have a *relish* for such scenes, is proof that his tone of religious feeling is low ; and by indulging the propensity, the habit of serious reflection of course becomes weakened, the spirit of devotion gradually declines, and as the world gains the ascendancy in the heart, all the more spiritual duties of the christian life become a weariness. I appeal to the conscience of any professing christian who has had experience on this subject, and especially of any one who has been reclaimed from his wanderings, whether he has not found that, just in proportion as a passion for the gaieties of life has prevailed in his heart, the spirit of christian devotedness has been driven away ; and whether he does not refer the increased vigor of his piety, and the brighter light and stronger hope which attend it, in a great measure to the fact that he has resisted and crucified this worldly propensity ?

2. It diminishes his *comfort*. This is evident from the remarks under the preceding article ; for, as a general rule, it may be expected that the amount of religious comfort which a christian enjoys, will be somewhat in proportion to the amount of piety which he possesses ; and it is derived in no small degree from contemplating the evidence, and indulging the hope, that his name is in the book of life. Of course then, just in proportion as this evidence and this hope become feeble—in other words, in the same degree that the spirit of piety languishes in the heart, his comfort declines ; and this is true not only of the enjoyment he derives from immediately contemplating the evidences of his christian character, but from the exercise of the various christian graces ; for the vigor or

the languor by which they are characterized will decide the amount of peace and joy by which they will be attended. If it be true then, as I have attempted to show, that the course of which I am speaking has a direct tendency to spiritual declension, of course it contributes in the same degree to the diminution of spiritual enjoyment.

But it tends to the same result in another way;—by arming the christian's own conscience against him. I do not say that a professor may not wander, and wander grievously in this respect, under the influence of an unenlightened conscience, or from not having given the subject suitable reflection; and in this case he may be tolerably free from compunction. And then again, I am well aware that it is possible for one to have violated the dictates of his conscience in this way so habitually, and for so long a time, that he may have gained a complete victory over it; and what once made him pause and well nigh shudder, he may be able now to resolve upon without a sentiment of remorse. But these two cases excepted, (and what conscientious christian would not shudder to be an example of either of them?)—I cannot conceive that any professor of religion can sanction by his presence the gaieties of the world, and escape all rebuke from the monitor within. He surely cannot reflect on what he is doing—whether he regards its influence on himself or on others—without a conviction that it is wrong; and in proportion to his moral sensibility will be the anxiety and pain which this conviction will bring with it. I know from the testimony of more than one who has had experience on this subject, that the very hours which have been devoted to social merriment, have some-

times been embittered by a deep sense of guilt ; while there has been that in the remembrance of them in connexion with the silent communings of the soul with itself, which would bite like a serpent and sting like an adder.

3. It inflicts a wound upon his *character*. That it does this in the view of his fellow christians who keep themselves in a good degree unspotted from the world, no one can doubt ; for there is every thing in their profession, and experience, and hopes, to lead them to regard with special favor a high tone of christian feeling and action in others ; and to estimate the merits of a professor by the spirituality and exemplariness of his life. But this remark holds true of the world, as well as the church. I acknowledge indeed that the votaries of fashionable folly are always glad to see the professed christian coming to mingle with them ; and they will sometimes take pains to show him how much they honor his independence and freedom from vulgar prejudices ; but I know that these same persons, when his back is turned, will not unfrequently triumph in his inconsistency ; and when their consciences are pressed with the obligations of religion, they will even appeal to his conduct as proof that religion does not make men the better. The truth is that worldly men have an understanding and a conscience, and they know the right and the wrong of this whole matter ; and that professor who thinks to mingle freely in the world's gaieties, and have it unobserved, cheats no one but himself. Were I at liberty, I could write a chapter of facts in illustration of this point, which would show most conclusively that every member of the church who places himself in such circumstances is marked ; and though no

murmur of disapprobation may ever reach his ear, yet the secret feeling of all around him is that he is out of his proper place, and is forfeiting his consistency as a christian.

4. It impairs his *usefulness*; and that in various ways.

It occupies time which might be, and ought to be, devoted to useful purposes. It is true indeed that the christian, in common with others, requires amusement; it is impossible that his mind should always be occupied in the same direction; and it is not less his privilege than his duty, occasionally to unbend from the severer labors of his stated employment: but the purpose of amusement may be answered, to a great extent, by a mere change of occupation; and the christian may still be doing good, though he is doing it in a different way. The least that can consist with his obligation, is, that that which he resorts to as an amusement, should actually have the effect of preparing his mind or body for more vigorous effort in his accustomed calling. But in the case to which I refer, even this end is not accomplished; on the contrary, there is usually an increased exhaustion, and a diminution of immediate ability to labor for useful purposes; so that the time which is spent, is not only lost, but worse than lost. And what christian will say that he is at liberty to let any portion of his time run to waste; or that he is not bound to fill up every hour in a way which will, either directly or indirectly, bring glory to God and benefit to his fellow men?

But there is an expense of money as well as time incident to this course of which I am speaking, by which the christian abridges his means of usefulness. If he is in the habit of accepting invitations to splendid parties, where

every thing is skilfully arranged for the excessive indulgence of the lighter passions, it becomes almost a matter of course, unless his condition in life actually forbids it, that he should give invitations in return ; and the expenditure which is hereby incurred in a single instance, might be sufficient, if it were differently applied, to accomplish some object of great private or public utility. I believe it is not uncommon for professors of religion to expend on a single occasion of social festivity, more than would suffice to sustain a missionary in the field for a whole year, or to scatter many hundred copies of the bible among the ignorant and perishing. But even admitting that he does nothing more than accept invitations, he still sanctions by his presence the wasting of his Lord's goods ; —a perversion of the bounties of providence to purposes worse than useless, when there are innumerable cases both of temporal and spiritual wretchedness which they might help to relieve.

There is also a diminished capacity for doing good in another respect ;—the feelings which prompt to benevolent action become, in a great measure, chilled, and sometimes there is, for a season at least, an apathy that borders upon aversion. This effect may be either general or particular. It is general, when the tone of spiritual feeling declines, and the mind perceptibly loses its interest in invisible things, and as a natural consequence, finds itself little disposed to wake to the appropriate duties of the religious life, and especially to the great duty of doing good to others ; for, as a general rule, the tone of genuine christian feeling will regulate the amount of benevolent action. It is particular, when the christian by intellectual dissipation, or bodily exhaustion, or the indulgence of a

light and inconsiderate spirit, unfits himself for the discharge of the duties which immediately devolve upon him. Is there not many a professor who can testify that, after having retired from a scene of gaiety, he has found himself utterly incapable of communion with God either in the family or the closet; and that his thoughts have been upon the vanities of the world, even while the language of devotion has been upon his lips?

Moreover, the christian lessens his usefulness, inasmuch as he puts it out of his power, to a great extent, even if he should desire it, to benefit in a spiritual way, by direct efforts, his thoughtless friends with whom he allows himself thus to associate. There is indeed little reason to expect that he will ever make the attempt; for even if he were to form the purpose, one would suppose that the consciousness of his inconsistency would seal his lips: but suppose he actually should summon the courage necessary to urge to reflection and repentance some irreligious friend, who had witnessed the levity of his own conduct—at any rate who had seen him in a circle of unrestrained gaiety, where even an allusion to a serious subject would have given offence,—and who can believe that any thing he should say would be likely to find its way to the heart? Would not that careless friend in all probability dispose of his counsels and admonitions, by calling to mind what he had seen of him on other occasions, reflecting that actions have a meaning as truly as words; and would he not be likely to think more of the inconsistency of christians than of the importance of christianity?

II. The professing christian who adopts this course, does an injury to his FELLOW CHRISTIANS.

Supposing that they are not like himself miserably conformed to the world, it cannot otherwise be than that he must deeply wound their feelings. Though they look upon him as a wandering brother, yet they regard him as a brother still ; and they are grieved that he should thus sacrifice his comfort, and make shipwreck of his obligations. They are grieved that the hopes which they had formed in respect to his usefulness are not likely to be realized ; that, instead of their being permitted to appeal to his example as illustrating the efficacy and excellence of the gospel, the world are appealing to it as evidence that christians are no better than others. And it pains them to contemplate the evidence which his conduct furnishes that he may not improbably be indulging the hope of the hypocrite ; that that course of backsiding which has begun in this species of conformity to the world, may terminate in open apostacy, not only from the spirituality of a christian life, but from the decency of a christian profession. And more than all, their heart sinks within them at the thought that the Saviour should be thus dishonored in the house of his friends ; that his cause should bleed through the instrumentality of those who profess to have been bought with his blood, and to have devoted themselves to his service. Who has not seen the young professor, within a little period after he has solemnly pledged himself before God and man to be a fellow helper with the members of the church to which he joins himself, rushing into the gaieties of the world, and thus practically treating these obligations as if they were a farce ? And what faithful christian that has looked upon such a defection, but has been ready almost to wish that his eyes were a fountain of tears, that he might weep day and

night over the dishonor and injury done to his beloved Lord ?

But this course of which I am speaking has not only a tendency to wound, but to dishearten, the faithful followers of Christ. For how can it be otherwise ? When they see those whom they confidently expected to be their coadjutors in every good work, turning away, as the case may be, from the circle of prayer to the house of mirth, and have evidence the most painfully conclusive that their own good influence is in a great degree counteracted by this conformity to the world, how natural is it that their resolution should falter, and their spirits sink, in view of this unexpected impediment to their usefulness ! It is not a mere negative influence that is exerted upon them ; but they are positively, and often greatly, disheartened ; and though they may feel deeply the importance that something efficient should be done to promote the interests of religion around them, or, as the case may be, for extending the kingdom of Christ in other lands, they will, in many instances, scarcely feel able to rise up to the work under such a pressure as their fellow professors hereby impose upon them. No doubt, if we knew the whole truth on this subject, we should find that many a revival of religion has been arrested at its very commencement, and many a promising enterprise for extending the gospel has been abandoned, from the check which has been prematurely given to the christian activity of the church, through the disheartening influence of the conduct of some of its members.

And there is a greater evil than either of those already mentioned, which often follows in the train of this species of lax conduct on the part of professors. Though

the first effect, in regard to some who are associated with them in the church, may be that their christian sensibility is wounded, or their resolution damped, yet, in the case of these very persons, a more remote effect may be, that their spirituality may yield to the influence of bad example, and they may actually fall into the very course which they once heartily deprecated. If we knew the whole secret why so many professors of religion sink their religious character in a habit of conformity to the world, no doubt we should find that one principal reason is that they are kept in countenance by each other ; and that they even meet the accusations of their own consciences, with the reflection that they are sustained by the example of those who have come under the same solemn obligations to a holy life with themselves. Instances frequently occur in which individuals, who set out in a christian profession with the most correct and even rigid notions on this subject, by observing the lax conduct of those who are fellow communicants with them in the church, and have promised to be fellow helpers with them unto the kingdom, in a little while strangely get rid of all their scruples, and are added to the melancholy list of examples, which no christian who is jealous for his Master's honor would be willing to imitate.

It is hardly necessary to add in connexion with the preceding remarks, that just in proportion as professors of religion allow themselves to mingle in the gaieties of the world, they lower the standard of christian character. It will always be found, where this evil prevails extensively in a church, that, though there may be many individuals who walk humbly with God and let their light shine, yet the prevailing spirit will be a spirit of worldli-

ness ; the tone of religious feeling and action will be low ; there will be comparatively little communion among the professed followers of Christ, and little in their daily deportment to distinguish them from the world. There is scarcely any thing with which the general prosperity of religion in a community is so intimately connected, as an elevated standard of christian character. To say nothing here of its influence upon the world, its tendency is to do great good to the church ; for while it affords rich encouragement to those members who are not disposed to be weary in well-doing, it furnishes a standing rebuke to any who may be inclined to spiritual apathy or a careless deportment, and secures to all the advantages of living under the benign influence of a holy example.

III. By mingling in the gaieties of life, the professor of religion does an injury to THE VAIN AND IRRELIGIOUS with whom he thus associates.

One way in which he accomplishes this, is by awaking in their minds a vague suspicion concerning the reality of religion. Every one perceives, on a moment's reflection, that it is most unreasonable to identify christianity with the character of its lax professors ; thus virtually making the gospel responsible for those very things which it peremptorily forbids. But so unjustly are the multitude disposed to deal with christianity, and so eager are they to find apologies for resisting the claims of religion, that it is no uncommon thing to hear individuals soberly urge the mistakes and errors of christians, and especially in this particular department of their conduct, as a justification of their own continued impenitence ; and no doubt the thought rises in many a breast, where it never escapes the lips, that there cannot be much hazard in let-

ting religion alone, if to be religious can consist with all that appears in the conduct of some of its professors. True the careless sinner who reasons in this way has a personal responsibility in this matter ; and if he persevere, he must take the fearful consequence of it in the everlasting ruin of his own soul : but what professing christian would deliberately become the occasion of his falling into this mad delusion, and incurring such a tremendous evil ? Let there be even a lurking sentiment in the breast of the unrenewed sinner that religion after all may turn out to be a fable, and there is not the most distant hope, so long as this state of mind continues, that he will practically embrace it ; for “ he that cometh to God must believe that he is, and that he is a rewarder of them that diligently seek him.” Remember, then, professing Christian, if you are instrumental in *any* way, of imbuing the mind of a careless sinner with a spirit of scepticism in ever so small a degree, you thereby oppose a formidable barrier to his salvation. He may indeed have an unwavering speculative conviction of the truth of religion, and yet never embrace it ; but so long as he doubts in respect to its truth, it were absurd to suppose that he should become a practical disciple.

But this conduct tends to the same result still farther, inasmuch as it arms the careless world with a weapon by which to ward off the blows which are aimed at their consciences. The result of any appeal that is made to the conscience of a sinner, depends, under God, upon the state of mind in which it happens to find him ; for if his understanding be stored with truth, and his conscience be sensitive and wakeful, there is good reason to hope that his duty may not be urged upon him in vain ;

but if his mind be blinded, and his moral sensibility impaired, by prejudice and error, and especially if he have fortified himself against every effort to arouse and convince him, by objections which he has taken up against religion, (no matter how he may have come by them) there is little reason to expect any good effect even from the most faithful and honest dealing. Suppose then that an individual who is careless of religion, and has been accustomed to meet professing christians amidst scenes of gaiety, and to use this fact in his own reflections, as many do, to the discredit of christianity—suppose he were to be addressed by some christian friend on the subject of his salvation; or suppose some fervent appeal should reach him in the house of God, or that serious thoughts should come unbidden into his mind in the hours of solitude—how very probable is it that, in either of these cases, he would stifle the inward monitor by the aid of a lurking and perhaps unacknowledged scepticism ! Say you that there is no harm in what you are doing, when you go to mingle with the vain and the gay in their own appropriate pleasures ? But is there no harm in furnishing them with an apology for putting off the claims of religion ? Is there no harm in supplying them with weapons by which to oppose the Spirit of God ? Is there no harm in increasing their facilities for self destruction ?

Is it not manifest also that, where professors of religion lend the influence of their example to the gaieties of life, their conduct serves to injure their careless associates by confirming them in that particular habit of sinful indulgence in which the strength of their unrenewed nature is not improbably especially centered ? Be it so that the ungodly friend whom you meet in these circumstan-

ces has nothing in his character that can be denominated vicious, while yet he has little or no thought respecting religion. Say then, what do you believe is the principal obstacle to his becoming a practical and decided christian? If it were your grand object to effect his conversion, at what point in his character should you expect to encounter the greatest difficulty? What is it that leads you, at this moment, more than any thing else, to fear that he never will be converted? Are you not constrained to acknowledge that it is his aversion to serious thought; his passion for vain amusement; in short, that very spirit which is indulged and cherished amidst a scene of worldly gaiety? If then you allow yourself to be present in such scenes do you not perceive that you are giving your sanction to the very habit which it is most difficult for him to abandon, but which nevertheless he must abandon, or lose his soul? There may indeed in the case supposed be nothing like open immorality; and if nothing else put the souls of men in jeopardy, this might be urged with some show of reason in vindication of your course; but so long as mere inconsideration—the simple neglect of religion, is as certainly fraught with eternal ruin as vice itself, every thing that you do to encourage an inconsiderate spirit, brings upon you the guilt of trifling with the immortal interests of your fellow creatures.

I will only add under this article, that the professing christian who falls into the current of worldly levities, does an injury not merely to his irreligious associates but to the world around him, by preventing the descent of the Holy Spirit. What is the spirit which we expect to see exhibited on the part of christians previous to a revival of religion? Undoubtedly a spirit of prayer, and hu-

mility, and self denial. But is there any thing which is more exactly the opposite of this than a spirit of worldly gaiety? What is it that is actually accomplished when religion is revived? Is it not the breaking up of the surrounding carelessness; the turning of the thoughts inward in self communion, and the lifting of them upward in humble prayer; and the weeping and the mourning of many in view of their own wanderings, and of the wide spread ruin which they see around them? But who can conceive of any thing more unlike this, than the bounding of gay hearts amidst the levities of life? Accordingly we find that, whenever the Spirit is copiously poured out upon a church, the voice of gaiety among its members is hushed; and if an individual summons the courage, or I should rather say, the hardihood, to go into a place of unhallowed mirth, his conduct is instantly marked as not in keeping with the spirit of the time, even by those who, in a season of spiritual apathy, might exhibit the same unedifying example.

Is it not fair then to conclude that, where professors allow themselves in this habit of conformity to the world, they prevent the effusions of the Holy Spirit, and thus stand in the way of the salvation of men? Let no one who indulges in such a course wonder if the earth around him is, in a spiritual sense, parched and sterile, and no plants of righteousness are seen shooting up to relieve the gloom of surrounding barrenness. Let him not marvel if month after month, and year after year, should pass away, and no voice of anxious inquiry should be heard in the circle, or the community, in which he moves; for he has only to look to his own conduct, and that of oth-

ers who are treading in his steps, to find a reason for this fact which ought to be overwhelming.

Would you then, professing Christian, witness a revival of pure religion, and the extension of the kingdom of Christ? Would you grow rapidly in grace, and avoid whatever may retard your progress in the divine life?—Would you be indeed a helper to your brethren and sisters in Christ, instead of wounding their feelings, or disheartening them in their efforts, or alluring them on to forbidden ground by your example? And finally, would you avoid the guilt and shame of having aided the ruin of immortal souls, and attain the honor and blessedness of having assisted to conduct them to glory? Then take heed that your intercourse with the world is regulated by the precepts and spirit of the gospel. Keep aloof from the vanities and gaieties of life. Remember that they are among the unfruitful works of darkness with which you are to have nothing to do, except to reprove them. Acting in all respects consistently with this principle, you will diffuse around you the light of a holy example; and that light you may hope will shine on the path of many of your fellow mortals to conduct them to heaven.

## CHAPTER IV.

### PLEAS OF THE PROFESSED CHRISTIAN FOR MINGLING IN THE GAIETIES OF THE WORLD, CONSIDERED.

THERE are various attitudes in which a professor of religion may be placed, that involve powerful temptations to that course of conformity to the world, which has been illustrated in the preceding chapters. He may have so far declined in spirituality as to have contracted a strong relish for the amusements and vanities of life ; or he may be thrown into circumstances in which it may seem to him extremely difficult to turn his back upon them ; or else he may have never reflected seriously on their evil tendency, and may have accustomed himself to regard them too much as matters of indifference : in either of these cases, there will be a temptation involved to which he will be in danger of yielding ; and if he determine to yield, just in proportion to the sensibility of his conscience, will be the necessity for inventing some apology to keep it quiet. Some of the pleas which are most frequently urged in justification of such a course, I will endeavor, in the present chapter, to analyze.

#### 1. “ *I shall be sneered at as superstitious, if I decline mingling in these scenes.*”

And suppose you are—have you not promised to take up the cross, and follow Christ, through bad, as well as good, report ? Was it not implied in the very condition

on which you became a disciple, that you would submit to any degree of reproach or indignity for the sake of him whom you had chosen as your Master? Does it not belong essentially to the nature of christian obedience that it extends to every precept of the gospel, no matter how great the difficulties which may be involved:—to the nature of christian self-denial, that it has respect to every forbidden pleasure, no matter how highly it may be valued, or how long it may have been enjoyed? Can you not even bear a taunting look in the cause of Him whom you have recognised as your Saviour and Lord? Surely this was not the spirit he evinced towards you, when, being rich, for your sake he became poor. In the agony of the garden, in the ignominy of the cross, in the deep humiliation of the grave, he exhibited towards you love stronger than death: and where is your gratitude, where the evidence of your discipleship, if you cannot stand up and brook the contempt of his enemies?

But let us look at this apology a little more closely, and see whether it does not contain the elements of an acknowledgment that the course which it is designed to excuse, is wrong. You will be *sneered at*—but who ever found it necessary to employ sneers in a good cause? Or if it be admitted that, in a certain sense, and on some rare occasions, this is justifiable, yet surely it can not be so in respect to any thing which conscience and the God of conscience unitedly prescribe as a duty. The very instrumentality then which is employed to induce you to yield, looks as if the cause were a suspicious one:—as if the object proposed could not be accomplished by fair and honorable means:—as if it were necessary to bring

in the world's dread laugh to do that for which sober argument could not be successfully employed.

But you will be sneered at as *superstitious*—you surely have not to learn that nothing is more common than for genuine religion to be represented in the world under the name of superstition ; and that, just in proportion as a christian cultivates a habit of spirituality, and makes it manifest that his affections are set upon things above, there are many who will charge him with being superstitious. Is not the very fact then that this epithet is employed in relation to a christian's declining to mingle in the gaieties of the world, to be taken as a presumptive evidence that such a course is in itself right, and that the opposite would involve a violation of his covenant obligations :

Still farther—consider who are the persons from whom you expect to encounter this treatment. Are they not the very persons who treat religion with levity or indifference ? Do you ever expect to see them in the prayer meeting or the social religious circle, or to hear from them any thing which indicates that they have any regard to the honor of Christ and his kingdom ? Do you not fully believe that they are under the dominion of that carnal mind which is enmity against God ? What then does the fact that such persons sneer at any particular course of conduct, imply ? Is it to be taken as a reason that such conduct is really unworthy the character of a christian : or does it not rather look as if it might be the very conduct which the precepts of the gospel would dictate, but which a world lying in wickedness would condemn ?

But what if it should turn out, after all, that the leading fact involved in this apology is magnified into an evil

which really has no existence ; and that, if the sneers of the world were ever so much to be deprecated, you have still nothing to fear from them in consequence of keeping aloof from scenes of gaiety ? I do not say that you may not, in individual cases, be greeted with a cold or even contemptuous look, especially if your conduct should indicate any thing like a timid or compromising spirit ; but this will rarely occur ; and even where it does, unless conscience is absolutely seared, the individuals who thus assail you will do violence to their own convictions. For wicked and worldly men have a conscience as truly as others ; and where they are surrounded by christian society, and live under a preached gospel, their conscience is almost of course in a good degree enlightened ; and however they may contrive to blind themselves in respect to their own duty, they have usually an exquisite perception of the obligations of professed christians. They know when you act in accordance with your profession, and when you do not ; and whatever the language of their lips may be, you would find, if you could look into their hearts, that, in the former case they honor your consistency, in the latter they secretly laugh you to scorn. Instances have fallen within my knowledge in which professors of religion have yielded up their scruples, and gone into scenes of gaiety, from the fear of being thought unreasonably rigid, who have, in the very act of mingling in these scenes, been pointed at, by some who have been present, with a sneering and triumphant air, as fine specimens of the purifying influence of christianity. I say again, you have nothing to fear from the sneers of the world in consequence of turning your back upon their gaieties ; but if you mingle in them, you have every

reason to expect, whether it comes to your knowledge or not, that a full measure of reproach will be dealt out to you.

2. "*By declining all intercourse with the gay world, I shall do an injury to religion, by leaving upon many minds the impression that it is the creature of gloom, and unfriendly to the innocent enjoyments of life.*"

Admit that this would be the effect—and what impression will you be likely to make by the opposite course? Why either that there is no reality in religion, or else that it is a matter of such small moment that there is no danger in indefinitely postponing it. And tell me honestly, which result you believe is most to be deprecated. Should you consider the case of an unrenewed friend as more hopeful, if he should tell you that he regarded religion as casting a damp on some of the joys of life, or if he should say that he believed it all a cheat, or at any rate that it was a subject of too little importance to engage his attention? Is it not manifest that, in the former case, there might be considerations urged upon his conscience, the force of which he would be obliged to acknowledge, even though his plea should not be abandoned; for admitting (what certainly is not true) that religion abridges in some measure the joys of the present, yet who would say that it is unworthy of regard, if it points to infinitely nobler and more enduring joys in the future? Especially who would say this, in view of the fact that it is the only thing that can save the soul from interminable ruin? But in the latter case,—that is, where there is a sceptical habit of mind in respect to the reality or importance of religion, I know not in what way I could gain a hold of the sinner's conscience, until I had succeeded

in inducing him to renounce his delusion. I might bring before his mind with ever so much urgency the coming realities of judgment and eternity ; but if he had even a lurking suspicion of the truth of what I was saying, I could have little hope of his being brought under its practical influence.

I say then, even admitting the fact upon which you build your plea, it does not, by any means, go to establish its validity ; for if the evil which you allege is likely to result from your declining to mingle in the gay world, a much greater evil will result from your consenting to mingle in it ; and if you are compelled to a choice between two evils, you are certainly bound to choose the least. But to concede the fact you urge, were to concede too much: the truth is, your keeping aloof from scenes of fashionable levity, does *not* leave an impression that religion is gloomy ; it only leaves an impression that it is, what the bible actually represents it, a momentous reality, and that he who would be a consistent christian cannot be conformed to the world. Between christian cheerfulness and worldly levity on the one hand, and between christian seriousness and a forbidding gloom on the other, there is a wide and essential difference ; and this difference the world fully understand ; and that christian who declines the gaieties of life, while yet he exemplifies the winning cheerfulness which appropriately belongs to his character, need not fear but that he will pass with the world for precisely what he is ; and even if they accuse him of austerity, they will do it in the face of their own honest convictions.

3. "*I cannot decline this kind of intercourse without giving offence.*"

Sometimes this apology is made in reference to the individual from whom the invitation comes, and sometimes in reference to near friends, particularly members of the same family with the individual invited, who are urging the acceptance of it; but, in either case, if the invitation is declined kindly and courteously, and especially if it is understood that the refusal is dictated by principle and conscience, there is usually very little danger of giving offence. It often happens that professors of religion, when they receive invitations of this kind, which they feel conscientiously bound to decline, alledge some reason for not accepting them growing out of considerations of convenience, rather than scruples of conscience; thus leaving the impression that, but for accidental circumstances, they would gladly have been present. But this is not only wrong, but extremely impolitic. It is wrong, as it involves a departure from the simplicity of the gospel; and it is impolitic, because the individual thereby encourages a repetition of the same thing, and imposes upon himself a necessity of still farther trifling with his conscience by offering unmeaning apologies, or else of meeting the case fairly under circumstances of far greater difficulty than if there had been no semblance of timidity or indecision. In every case of this kind I would say, avoid the appearance of insincerity; and either decline the invitation without giving any reason, in which case the true one will very soon be understood, or else let your refusal be put distinctly on the ground that any other course would be inconsistent with your convictions of christian duty. Let this be done in a single instance, or at most in a very few instances, and there will be no occasion to repeat it farther; and let it be done in the man-

ner which christian courtesy dictates, and it will be strange indeed if a single individual should regard you with diminished good will.

There are, I acknowledge, some cases in which the christian's duty on this subject is attended with peculiar difficulties. There are instances in which a christian female is connected in the most endearing relation with a man devoted to worldly pleasure; and he may claim it as his privilege that his wife should accompany him into the gay scenes of fashionable life. And there are instances too in which the pious child is urged into similar places by irreligious parents; the latter neither considering nor regarding the obligations of a christian profession.—But even in these cases, if there be, on the part of the wife or the child, a proper degree of decision, prudence and kindness, the point will almost always be gained with comparative ease; for he does not deserve the name of husband who will not respect the religious principles of his wife; nor does he deserve to be called a father who will employ parental authority in opposing the conscience of his child. But where respectful remonstrance and kind expostulation will not avail, and the wife or the daughter is compelled to go into circles from which her own conscience would keep her, if she were permitted to obey its dictates—though she is bound, so far as she can, to study the things that make for domestic peace—it is not less her duty than her privilege to throw the responsibility of the act where it properly belongs. This, however, is an extreme case, which is never likely to occur, where there is, on the part of the husband or father, a common degree of self respect, or of conjugal or parental tenderness.

But the same plea in substance is often made in favor of *giving* gay and fashionable parties. Says the professor of religion, "I do not find any enjoyment in them; but unless I occasionally give an invitation, I shall lose the good will of many of my acquaintance."

Never was there a greater mistake. You may indeed forfeit the privilege (if you regard it one) of having your name ring among the votaries of fashion; but you may also escape the dishonor of having it held up to public odium in connexion with the fact that you are a professor of religion. And not one even of those who would be glad to see you taking the lead in such an enterprise, would think the worse, but all would think the better, of you for declining it. But suppose you actually yield, and summon the votaries of gaiety in large numbers around you, and furnish them with all the means of gratification they can expect, and the evening passes off in a whirl of frivolity and pleasure;—what after all do you really believe you have gained by it? Not one of those individuals to whose amusement you have contributed so much, will feel a particle of gratitude towards you; but all will regard it as a mere offering to the pride of life—a necessary means of keeping up a name in the walks of fashion; and it is more than probable that some of your guests may laugh at your foolish zeal, and perhaps your unsuccessful attempt, to eclipse your neighbors. When the company have dispersed, and the quiet of your dwelling is restored, you may sit down and reflect that you have not risen in the estimation of a solitary individual whom you have entertained; and that, if you could hear a faithful report of the remarks that have already been made respecting your pride, your ambition, and above all your

religion, it would not improbably crimson your cheek with blushes.

But suppose that you really could not decline giving or accepting invitations but at the expense of wounding the feelings of some of your worldly friends—if this consideration weighs so heavily upon you, what will you do with the fact that your yielding, in either case, will give pain to many of your *christian* friends ;—those too whose happiness you have solemnly pledged yourself to promote by every means in your power ? And is it so, that you regard the obligations of worldly courtesy as paramount to those of *christian* affection ;—that it involves a greater sacrifice for you to disregard the wrong feelings of the world, than the right feelings of the church ? Then, I am constrained to say, you give evidence of no equivocal sort that you have cast in your lot with the former, and that you sustain to the latter only an external relation : and instead of urging upon you the obligation of a *christian* to avoid being conformed to the world, I would press you with the sinner's obligation to exercise repentance towards God and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ.

4. “ *Other professors of religion mingle in such scenes, and it is no worse for me than for them.*”

But this very apology takes for granted that it is wrong ; and inspiration hath said that you shall not follow even the multitude to do evil. Remember that a sinful action is just as bad, when you are kept in countenance in doing it by the example of thousands, as if it had never been done by any person on earth besides yourself. This very plea then contains within itself the elements of your condemnation, as it includes a virtual acknowledgment of your guilt. There is no license to

sin in any circumstances, and in confessing that any particular action is wrong, you virtually declare that it ought not to be repeated. But in saying that your conduct in the case which I am considering is *no worse* than that of some other professors, you certainly acknowledge that it is not right: of course the plea by which you would sustain yourself in it, suggests the very reason why it should be abandoned.

Besides; who, let me ask, has constituted the example of professing christians your rule of duty? Has not God given you in his word the *only* rule? And have you not the life of Jesus there exhibited as a perfect exemplification of that rule? What occasion then, nay what right, have you, to look away from this perfect standard of duty, to the imperfect standard which is furnished by the lives even of the most exemplary of your fellow professors; much less of those whose conduct is little better than an unbroken course of conformity to the world? You are indeed bound to consider and imitate the example of christians, so far as they conform to the great model; but when you turn away from the perfect rule, and shape your conduct according to the loose maxims of the world, on the ground that they are practically adopted by some who call themselves christians, what better do you than trifle with your own conscience, and injure your own soul?

And have you reflected where this principle, if carried to its legitimate results, will land you? If you are justified in pleading the example of professed christians as your warrant for mingling in the gaieties of the world, why may you not with equal reason plead it in justification of participating in the vices of the world? If

there are professors who enter fully into the amusements of fashionable life, so also there are those who are unjust and oppressive in their dealings, and who are found in the haunts of dissipation and excess ; indeed there is hardly a vice, but if you should look through the annals of christianity, or even consult the record of your own observation, you would find that it had been acted out in the life of some one or more who have had a place in the visible church. *You* may not perhaps have occasion to plead the example of professors for any thing beyond a participation in worldly gaieties ; but suppose your neighbor should be inclined to extend the principle a little farther, and urge it in defence of open and flagrant vice, what have you to object to such an application ? If the apology is good in your case, it is good in his ; and when he points to the dishonest professor in justification of his own dishonesty, to the intemperate professor in justification of his own intemperance, whatever others may say in the way of condemning him, *you* can say nothing but at the expense of condemning yourself.

But admitting that the course which this plea is designed to defend is wrong, (and this is here taken for granted,) do you not perceive that the very principle on which the plea is built, involves the provision for perpetuating an evil ? For if you may plead the example of some professors, others may plead your example with the same reason ; and the conduct of these may in turn become an example for others still ; and thus there is no point at which we can reasonably calculate that the evil will be arrested. If it should continue and increase in the church, it will be because others adopt the same

principle which controls your conduct: if its progress should be checked, it will be because others are wiser, and better, and more decided, than yourself, and resolve that, let the current of example set whichever way it may, they will keep a conscience void of offence.

You say, perhaps, that you expect that this practice among christians, at some future day, will cease; but that the church has not reached such a degree of spirituality that she has a right to look for this at present; and so you are willing to be found in the wrong, until the current of example actually forces you into the right. But if here is an existing error, on whom devolves the duty of endeavoring to remove it rather than yourself? And besides, by persisting in it as long as you can, do you not perceive that you are contributing to palsy the efforts of those who have a better disposition than yourself? Is it not manifest that the longer the practice is indulged, and the greater the number who give it their sanction, so much the stronger will be the current to be opposed by somebody in ultimately abolishing it? That it will be abolished at last, there is no room for doubt; but surely no part of the honor will belong to you, if, with your eye upon the lax example of others, you shall have contributed the full influence of your example, to increase the difficulty of the work.

5. "*There is far less evil connected with a gay and fashionable party, than there is with those smaller meetings for social purposes, in which a few individuals come together and slander their neighbors.*"

Be it so—and what then? Are you at liberty to commit one sin, because there are other greater sins than that to which you are tempted? Suppose an individual were

charged with dishonesty, and he should attempt to justify himself on the ground that dishonesty is not so great a crime as murder ;—where is the court, where is the individual, that would sustain such an excuse for a moment ? But this is precisely what you do in urging the plea under consideration. Before it could be of any avail, it would behoove you to show that you had the alternative presented before you of attending a gay and splendid party, or of joining with a few individuals in slandering your neighbors, and that you were compelled to choose between these two evils ; whereas the real state of the case is, that you are entirely at liberty to decline both. The fact that you keep aloof from the gaieties of the world neither imposes upon you any obligation, or any necessity to be a slanderer.

But this objection would seem to take for granted, what I really have yet to be convinced of—that one of the principal things which are done in the smaller circles of social life, is to give loose to a propensity to slander. No doubt this spirit frequently discovers itself in such circles, as well as in almost all other circumstances ; not excepting even those occasions which the objection would seem to imply are entirely free from it ; for where this happens to be the ruling passion of any individual, it will most probably show itself in spite of *any* circumstances. But I can see no reason why a few persons may not assemble for social purposes, and so far as the failings of their neighbors are concerned, keep a watch at the door of their lips, as truly as in any other condition. And while this seems entirely practicable, I cannot but think that, to a great extent at least, it is accordant with fact. If the opinion of those who have had most experience on the subject

could be gained, especially of those who move in the better walks of society, I venture to say, it would be that a slanderous spirit is by no means a *prevailing* characteristic of the smaller social circles in which they are accustomed to mingle; and that they have passed many an evening with a few friends, without hearing the character of an individual, either directly or indirectly, assailed.

After all, though I would not undertake to ascertain exactly the relative guilt of slander and certain other evils with which this objection places it in contrast, it may reasonably be questioned, admitting that there is as much slander as is alleged, whether these other evils do not more than counterbalance it. That slander is a great evil is surely not to be questioned;—but that it is greater than pride, and levity, and extravagance, and a whole array of circumstances fitted to cherish insensibility to religion, and possibly something very much like slander superadded, may reasonably admit of doubt. Happily for the conscientious christian, he is not compelled to choose between these two different classes of evils; but if he were really obliged to encourage one or the other, would he not at least find reason to deliberate, before he made his election in favor of the latter?

6. “*By being present on these occasions, I may be able to prevent evil, and give a profitable direction to much of the conversation.*”

But how is it usually with other professors who place themselves in similar circumstances? Do you really believe that, where they allow themselves to mingle in such scenes, they exert the least influence in preventing irregularity or even excess? Is not the fact that they are found

there perfectly well understood by the world to indicate that they have come prepared to take things as they find them ; and does the gayest votary of pleasure who may be present, dream that he shall give them any offence by yielding himself up to his accustomed indulgences ? And in point of fact, is it not found that almost every professing christian who enters such a circle, does nothing, either directly or indirectly, to check the current of worldly levities, or to leave an impression that he has less relish for the passing scenes than those around him ? Often have I heard it said by the votaries of thoughtlessness, and with an air of triumph too, that such and such professors of religion were with them in the scenes of their gaiety, and that there were none who seemed to have higher enjoyment. If such has been the result in respect to the great mass of professors who have gone into the gay world, and even those who have gone with the very plea which I am now considering ;—if, instead of endeavoring to keep others within the bounds of decorum and innocence, they have thrown themselves on the bosom of the current, and been carried along, without even an effort at resistance ; how can you reasonably expect that your experience in similar circumstances will differ essentially from theirs ? Are you sure that you have larger measures of grace than they ;—that you have more strength to sustain you in the hour of temptation ?

But pardon me for coming still nearer to your conscience. Do you believe that you are sincere in making this plea ? Dare you say, in the presence of that God who searches your heart, that it is your honest intention to exhibit the christian character in that scene of mirth and amusement, to which you are invited ? Do you really

expect to say or do any thing that shall distinguish you in any way from the rest of the company ; or that shall impose the least check upon any rising irregularity ; or that shall lead any individual who witnesses your conduct to take knowledge of you that you have been with Jesus ? Or rather, do you not calculate upon being occupied in precisely the same manner with the rest ; and if you knew that the consequence of your being present must be that you would be obliged, however indirectly, to take the attitude of a reprobate, and to indicate your dissatisfaction with the gay scenes which were going on around you, would you not unhesitatingly determine to stay at home ? Believe me, it is possible for an individual to satisfy his conscience in this matter by the general reflection that his influence on these occasions may be for good, while yet the secret feeling of his heart is that, for the time being, he shall be as truly a creature of thoughtlessness and vanity as the rest. I once knew a professedly pious young man apologise for his going to a ball, on the ground that it might afford him an opportunity to converse with some present in respect to their salvation. But if he dropped a word to an individual on any religious topic,—which I greatly question—I am sure it was done merely to compromise with a waking conscience. I admit that there are occasions in social life, which may well justify the presence of professors, with a view to their giving them a right direction ; but in the case which I am supposing there is, humanly speaking, an absolute impossibility of such a result ; for things are purposely arranged with the express view of giving to the gay world the controlling influence. I will not say that, even in such a case, a professor *may* not indulge an honest desire and expectation of being able

to do good ; but if so, I cannot doubt that the experiment will reveal to him his mistake ; and in far the greater number of instances, I am constrained to believe, if he would question his conscience more closely, he would find that the desire of doing good was subordinate to the desire of worldly enjoyment.

Inquire yet again, if you hope to be useful in these circumstances, what facilities for doing good you will be likely to enjoy ? Do you expect to exert a salutary influence by the general gravity of your appearance, as contrasted with the levity of the surrounding multitude ?— But, rely on it, the multitude are too gay to be influenced by any such consideration ; and if you attract their attention at all, it will probably be to ridicule your singularity, and perhaps to call you a hypocrite. Do you expect to do good by serious conversation ? But who does not see that this is in bad keeping with the occasion ; and if you were to address any individual concerning his salvation, how naturally might he reply that you had not chosen the right place for it, and turn away from you in disgust to let his heart cheer him amidst the brilliant and fascinating exhibitions by which he was surrounded ! And besides, in a gay and crowded assemblage, how difficult is it to find an opportunity for the conversation of a moment in private ; especially for conversation on so important a concern as the salvation of the soul ! Do you say that this inconvenience may be remedied by retiring with the individual with whom you would converse into some other apartment ? But it is more than probable he might not be disposed to accompany you, especially on such an errand ; and even if he were, why would it not be better to direct your atten-

tion to individuals who were already in circumstances of retirement, and whose thoughts were not dissipated by a scene of unhallowed levity? Do you say that you hope the very presence of a professing christian will operate as a restraint? Let me tell you there may be a number of professing christians mixed up in such an assemblage, and not one of all those children of gaiety may seem to know that one such individual is present. The power of controlling lies in the hands of the multitude; and all that the presence of a few professors can do, is as the small dust of the balance. I say, then, you have no opportunity to do good on these occasions, even if you honestly intend it: here is really no field for benevolent or useful action; and whoever expects to find one will inevitably reap a harvest of disappointment.

But you will point me perhaps to some instance of a sinner's having been actually awakened amidst the gaieties of a fashionable party, or even of the ball room. And so can I point you to a case in which the very same thing has happened amidst a scene of the grossest dissipation and the most daring blasphemy. Does the fact adduced in the former case, prove that the christian should be found in places of fashionable amusement, that he may put forth his efforts to advantage for the conversion of sinners;—then does the fact adduced in the latter case prove that he should mingle freely in scenes of boisterous revelry and profane mirth, as if that were the field in which he could labor with the greatest hope of success for the salvation of his fellow men.

7. *"I have no fear that mingling in gay parties will do me any harm."*

What if it will not—Are you the only being whose interests are of any value? Is not the soul of your brother, or sister, or any other human being around you, just as valuable as yours? Suppose then you are not to be injured by being present on such an occasion ; yet if others will suffer in consequence of your example—if it shall be the means of leading into temptation some of your fellow professors who have less power of resistance than yourself ; or of keeping some impenitent sinner quiet in a habit of carelessness, who might otherwise be roused from his slumbers, is the fact that *you* are to escape un-hurt a sufficient apology for your being thus engaged? But I have already shown you, in a former chapter, that this effect in respect to others is inevitable ; and that the bad influence which is thus exerted, it will probably be beyond your power subsequently to counteract. Unless then you can show—what I am sure you will not attempt—that it matters not what becomes of others, provided you are safe, I think you cannot fail to perceive that this apology must pass for nothing.

But far be it from me to concede your claim of being beyond the reach of personal harm in this matter. You are just as truly exposed to evil as any other person. You are a partaker of the same flesh and blood with others ; and as a christian, (if indeed you are one,) you are subject to the same infirmities and corruptions, and have the same liabilities to yield to temptation, with your fellow christians. Nay, I venture to go farther, and say that you are in *peculiar* danger ; for the actual danger in any case is always much in proportion to the degree in which the individual is awake to the threatening evil ; and there is that in the very plea you urge, which shows

that you are not awake to it at all. If I saw you making ready for an occasion of this kind as a man would enter a hospital, fully apprehensive that you would be exposed to evil, and guarding yourself against it by devout meditation and fervent prayer, I might hope that you would possibly escape unhurt ; but when I witness no such preparation, and instead of it hear a self-confident declaration that you feel perfectly secure against harm, I am constrained to believe that you are the very individual who, from having commenced a course of backsliding, will most easily fall before the power of temptation ; and much as I may wish for a different result, I confidently expect that the event will be a practical illustration of the futility of your plea, and the weakness of your principles.

There are other pleas to the same effect sometimes urged, which it were easy to prove equally futile with those which have already been considered. But I am willing to believe that enough has been said to satisfy any professor of religion in respect to his duty, who honestly wishes to ascertain it ; and as for those who will evade the considerations that have been urged, no doubt they would find some way of disposing of any others that *could* be urged. I will only say farther, let every professor who is tempted to admit any apology in this case, analyze it well before he allows himself to act under its influence. Let him refer it to the eternal standard of truth and duty, and inquire of his conscience and of his God, how it will bear to be looked at by the light of the judgment day.



## CHAPTER V.

### RESPONSIBILITY OF CHRISTIANS IN THE HIGHER WALKS OF LIFE, IN RESPECT TO THE PREVAILING CONFORMITY TO THE WORLD.

It is an immutable law of the divine administration, that, “unto whomsoever much is given, of him shall be much required.” Hence those who move in an elevated sphere, and have the means of exerting a commanding influence, are responsible for an amount of good equal to the extended means of usefulness with which they are favored. And hence too, they who neglect or pervert this important talent, and use it for the injury, rather than the benefit, of their fellow creatures, are bringing together the elements of a fearful retribution.

There are those in the church as well as in the world, who, from their elevated standing in life, send abroad an influence for good or evil, which circulates through all the pores of society. Let a few individuals of high standing in a church combine their influence to lower the standard of christian character ; or without any special effort at combination, let them severally exhibit in a high degree the spirit of the world ; and in all probability that church, as a body, will soon have lamentably declined in all that constituted its beauty and strength. Let any extensive community of professed christians, or if you please, the church at large, have within its bosom a great

number of a similar character—men of commanding influence, and yet of a worldly spirit—and you can expect nothing better than that the spiritual vigor and energy of the whole body will be greatly diminished. It is in view of the extensive influence which is possessed by christians in the higher classes, and of the fact that so many of them have, either directly or indirectly, given their sanction to scenes of worldly gaiety, that they are to be held chiefly responsible for the prevailing conformity to the world.

In illustrating the responsibility of this class of professors in reference to this matter, my first remark is, that *the evil has its existence principally among them*. If you look through any community, you will find that the great majority of those who give gay and splendid parties, move in the higher circles of society ; and if you should take pains to ascertain who are present on these occasions, you would generally find that they were persons who approximate at least, in their worldly condition, towards the individual by whom the invitation is given : or if they happen, in some cases, to be much below him, yet they are still recognised, in some general sense, as belonging to the same class. One principal reason of this, no doubt, is, that there is an amount of expenditure incident to such an occasion, which it is not convenient for any other than a person of affluence to incur. I know there are rich men in the middle walks of life ; and I know too there are many who are not rich, in whom the pride of life is so far the ruling passion, that they hesitate not to embarrass themselves, and ultimately to distress their families, for the sake of indulging it ; but in most cases where you find a large fortune, you find

that its possessor has already mounted up into the higher circles ; or if he has not, that it is only from the lack of a disposition ; and so too, where you see an individual incurring the expense of a splendid and fashionable party, you will ordinarily find that he has, or supposes himself to have, pecuniary resources adequate to justify it.

But the responsibility of the more opulent and influential class of professors, appears farther, from *the influence which they exert in this particular upon each other.* This influence is exerted in encouraging a spirit of ambition, in suppressing scruples of conscience, or in imparting courage to encounter opposition and censure. Here is an individual who would be quite willing to let the gaieties of the world alone, provided he could do so without seeming to come short of some of his fashionable neighbors ; but when he looks at them, and sees them collecting the votaries of pleasure by hundreds in their dwellings, and hears of, or perhaps witnesses, the brilliant and fascinating scenes which are going forward there, the spirit of ambition whispers to him that, if he would not lose his rank in society, he must go and do likewise. Yonder is another individual who has really a relish for fashionable amusements, and would gladly have his habitation echo to the voice of unhallowed mirth ; but he cannot keep out of view the fact that he is a professor of religion, and has solemnly covenanted to walk with God's people in an exemplary manner ; and the question arises, how he can gratify his propensity on the one hand, without violating his obligations on the other ? If there were no bad examples to which he could turn his eye at such a moment, no doubt the suggestions of conscience would prevail ; but unhappily he looks at one, and another, and

another, of his fellow professors, and sees them walking in the same path to which he is inclined ; and when he reflects that they are in the church as well as he, that whatever responsibility he incurs by yielding up his scruples, they have incurred already, he straightway bids the monitor within be still ; and the next you hear of him, the children of vanity are coming by scores to witness the splendor with which he can entertain them, and to turn his house into a theatre of wild confusion and delirious joy. And there is yet another individual who may be influenced either by the spirit of ambition, or the love of gaiety, to wish to have a similar scene in *his* dwelling : he knows, however, that it will be unpopular in the church, and he is not quite sure that it may not subject him to some reproach in the world : but here again comes up the all-sustaining reflection that other professors around him are doing the same thing ; and that, though he could not so well afford to sustain the responsibility of such a measure alone, yet in consideration of the fact that he is *not* alone, he concludes that he may safely enough proceed. And accordingly, it will be found, if I mistake not, that where a professor has actually yielded in this case, and the voice of censure and reproach subsequently reaches his ear, he is exceedingly apt to carry his grievance to those in the same circumstances with himself ; and they join in mutually defending each others' conduct, and reprobating the illiberal spirit which has been exercised towards them, and setting it all down to the account of vulgar prejudice, or corroding envy, or gross ignorance of human nature.

It were well if this unhappy influence terminated on the class in which it originates ; but *it is carried down*

*among the lower classes, and is felt, no doubt, in a greater or less degree, through all the ranks of society.* I admit that we do not ordinarily see in the humbler classes, the same amount of parade and splendor as in the higher ;— *that* is not to be expected for the reason already given ; nevertheless, there are instances in which men in the middle walks of life, and professors of religion too, evidently, in this respect, ape the example of those above them ; and actually make entertainments scarcely less expensive, or public, or dangerous to the interests of religion, than are most of those which occur nearer the pinnacle of society. But even where this is not done, the influence of the higher classes of professors is felt upon the lower, in leading many of them to go in this respect to the full measure of their pecuniary ability ; and though their parties may be formed on a less expensive scale, yet they have in them the elements of almost every evil which is incident to similar collections in the higher circles. Particularly they yield themselves up to the same spirit of unrestrained levity ; and give the lighter passions full control ; and possibly do not always keep on the right side of the line which separates decency from vulgarity. Not improbably, in all this, they may wish to be thought independent ; and to be acting without reference to the opinion or the example of any body ; but if you knew all, you would probably know that they had their eye fastened on some professors who occupy places above them, whose conduct *ought* to be worthy of their imitation ; and if you should venture to rebuke the inconsiderateness which characterizes their deportment, peradventure they would, in their hearts, if not with their lips, answer your reproof by an appeal to the example of some of their brethren in

the church of more wealth and influence than themselves.

It is evident, I think, from the preceding remarks, that, if professors in the higher walks of life would become right on this subject, the evil we are contemplating, would at once, in a great measure, be cured ; not only because it has its primary operation in the circles in which they move, but because their opinions and example form, to a great extent, the real, though unacknowledged, law of the multitude below them. Surely then, such a reformation must be regarded by every christian who is alive to his Master's honor, as of the highest importance ; for the result would certainly be a far more elevated standard of christian character among all classes of professors.

Methinks I hear some professing christian who has hitherto been known in the circles of fashion, say, ‘ Such a change would indeed be desirable ; but then, who shall begin it, and how shall it be begun ? ’ I answer, begin it yourself ; for there is not a human being on whom it more properly devolves ;—and if you will lend me your attention a moment, I will tell you both how to begin, and how to proceed, that the happiest result may be secured.

Begin then *by settling it in your mind that whatever others may do, you will be faithful to your convictions of duty.* Resolve that you will meet every temptation to the course you have hitherto pursued, come from whatever source it may, by a simple reference to the requirements of God ; and that neither the love of pleasure, nor the spirit of ambition, nor a regard to the smiles of the gay and worldly, shall prevail over the honest decisions of your conscience. And with a consciousness of your

own weakness, let the resolution be formed in the strength of all sufficient grace ; and invoke the aids of that grace, humbly, and fervently, and daily, to enable you to carry your purpose into effect.

In the next place, *make known your purpose to some one or more of your friends, who have been accustomed, like yourself, to be seen often in the gay world, and endeavor to enlist them in the same course on which you have already entered.* In this way, you will accomplish two important ends: you will fortify your own resolution against the temptations by which it may be assailed ; and you will increase the amount of influence which is to bear upon the evil that you wish to remedy.

Does it occur to you that you might do all this and more, and still little or no impression would be made on the mass of society around you ? Rely on it, you are in a mistake. Admitting, what I here take for granted, that Providence has placed you in an elevated station, and that the individual or individuals who join you in the resolution are in similar circumstances, you *will* exert an influence that will be felt, and sooner or later acknowledged, in every circle in the surrounding community. Some professors, who have had little or no inclination for the gaieties of life, but have been afraid to decline them lest they should appear singular in the circle in which they move, will look at your example and take courage : others, whose hearts are too much in them, and who have kept conscience quiet by observing how strongly the current of public opinion has seemed to set in their favor, will look at your example, and feel rebuked ; for conscience will take advantage of it to remind them that they are in the wrong ; and in the train of reflection and re-

morse there is reason to hope may come repentance. Say not that what *you* can do will be of little avail. I doubt not that in almost every church which includes a considerable number in the higher ranks of society, there are several individuals, any one of whom might set causes in operation which would ultimately, and at no distant period, completely remove this evil, which is so obviously a worm at the root of the church's prosperity.

The next thing to be considered is, if you give up this kind of intercourse of which I have spoken, *what shall be substituted in its place?* The answer to this inquiry has already been anticipated, to some extent, in a preceding chapter; but it may be proper here to suggest a few things, even though it should be at the expense of repetition. I say again then, I am far from desiring that you should never meet in the social circle your friends who are not professors of religion: on the contrary, you should regard it a privilege to associate with them in this way, especially as furnishing you an opportunity of doing them good. But that the objects which you should desire to gain in bringing your acquaintances around you, may be accomplished, you must be somewhat cautious and discriminating in your selection; always taking care that so large a part of your guests shall be persons of stability and seriousness, as is necessary to secure a controlling influence in favor of what is decent and useful; and if your gay friends who happen not to be invited, should complain of your partiality or laugh at your scrupulousness, you may be assured that they will still in their consciences honor your consistency. And even this class need not, by any means, be *altogether* excluded: only take care and keep them a minority in the circle, and let them be made prac-

tically to understand that it is the right of the majority, in this, as in other cases, to rule. Let there be a few such persons in a sober and intelligent collection, and they will be subject to a restraint which will keep them from violating any of the rules of decorum. But let the same persons be in a circle composed, with few exceptions, of those of their own character, and they will be fellow helpers with those around them in all that is vain, and boisterous, and foolish.

Not only in the selection of your guests, but in other ways, make provision, so far as you can, for a cheerful, social, profitable meeting. Endeavor, as you have opportunity, to give the conversation such a turn, as will be likely to unite instruction with rational amusement. If you have specimens of the curious or the beautiful, whether in nature or art, you may innocently and usefully exhibit them: and probably there will be some of your friends, whose taste such an exhibition would serve particularly to gratify. You may also, with perfect propriety, have the exhilarating and delightful influence of music; provided always it be decorous and dignified. I have already intimated that you are to provide against irregularities, to a great extent, in the selection of your guests; but if, notwithstanding, you should, at any time, discover among them a rising spirit of disorder, you ought in some way to manifest your disapprobation; and you may ordinarily suppress it by a single look. Your entertainment certainly should be generous and respectable; but not marked by ostentation or extravagance. And finally, every thing should be conducted with such freedom from frivolity and nonsense, and such strict regard to decorum, that if it should be thought best to close

the evening with prayer, no individual should feel that any thing had occurred to render such a step incongruous. Does not all this appear perfectly reasonable and practicable? Where is the professing christian whose conscience does not decide in favor of such a party as I have now described, rather than those which I have endeavored to show, bring dishonor upon religion, and palsy the energies of the church?

I cannot conclude this chapter without calling upon christians in the higher walks of life, who have been accustomed hitherto to mingle freely or occasionally in the gaieties of the world, to ponder solemnly their responsibility in reference to this matter. I should not discharge my conscience before God, if I were not honestly to declare my conviction, that this course involves an amount of guilt to which you could not awake without being startled; that it involves injury to the cause of Christ, which ought, in view of the past, to bring you upon your knees in humiliation and penitence. I cannot say how far God may interpose, by his providence and Spirit, to counteract the untoward influence of your lax example; but if you continue in this course, and the standard of christian character around you should be miserably depressed, and the multitude should keep on slumbering in the arms of spiritual death, and the rain and the dews of heavenly grace should be withheld, and there should be few or none to mourn over the surrounding desolation; you may sit down and reflect that this is all the natural fruit of your own doings. If you were acting for yourselves only, the evil would be far less; but you are exerting an influence on all within your reach, and especially on all below you. You are contributing directly and

efficiently to depress the standard of religious feeling and action, and to render indistinct and dubious the line that separates the church from the world. Nay more, you are lending your influence to propagate this evil to future generations ; for the religious character of the present age, whatever it may be, will descend, in a great measure, to the next ; so that the unfaithful professor will perpetuate himself, if not in the memories, yet in the characters, of many who will come after him. Persevere in this course of conformity to the world, and you need not wonder if the thought should come to you on your death bed, that, though you have had a place in the Lord's vineyard, you have been worse than a cumberer of the ground ; if the fact should be revealed to you in the gate of eternity, that you have ruined your own soul, and the additional fact that innumerable other souls have been ruined by your instrumentality.

But suppose, on the other hand, you resolutely turn away from the gay world, and resolve that you will never again mingle in it ; and suppose you not only persevere in this purpose yourselves, but endeavor to carry others along with you, and determine, if your life is spared, to exert your influence in this way, till this evil is effectually removed from the church ;—if you do this, I say, it must be left for the ages of eternity to develope the amount of good which you will thereby be instrumental of accomplishing. Let such a reformation as this become universal, and one of the greatest obstacles to the success of the gospel would be taken out of the way.—Religion would then walk about the earth, not indeed in habiliments of gloom, but in robes of consistency.—Revivals would multiply on every side, not merely be-

cause christians would have more time and more inclination to pray and labor for them, but because that divine influence by which every revival is originated and sustained, would not be resisted or grieved away by the conformity of the church to the world. That cold and proud and selfish spirit which is so often exhibited by professors in the higher circles towards their brethren and sisters in humbler circumstances, would rapidly decline ; and it would be felt by all that the distinctions of society which God has ordained, may exist consistently with an affectionate intercourse between christians of every class and condition. And the present age would acquire a character for consistency and spirituality, which would well bear to be transmitted to ages to come ; and beyond the grave, when the doings of the present shall be looked at by the light of eternity, they who had been active in this reform would no doubt see, not only that they had saved souls from death, and caused Zion to look forth in increased beauty and strength, but that they had exerted a most direct and decisive influence towards the introduction of millenial glory.

Brethren and sisters, whom God has elevated above the mass of your fellow christians, by conferring upon you wealth, or honor, or influence, let me entreat you, yet once more, not to suffer yourselves to be ensnared by the gaieties of fashionable life. By a regard to every thing connected with your own immortal interests, but more especially here by a regard to the salvation of sinners, the bleeding cause of religion, the dishonored name of your Redeemer, I entreat you, in this matter, to act the part of consistent christians. Dream not that I have magnified the evil against which I have been endeavoring

to guard you: on the contrary, be assured that its influence is far more diversified, and extensive, and disastrous, than you or I can at present conceive. Ponder the solemnity and responsibility of your condition every day that you live. Rise up to the faithful and vigorous discharge of duty in this respect, and I may venture to pronounce that a tide of blessing will begin to set in upon you, which will continue to flow while immortality endures.



## CHAPTER VI.

### THE CHRISTIAN'S INTERCOURSE WITH THE UNRENEWED SINNER IN RESPECT TO HIS SALVATION.

HITHERTO I have considered the christian in some of the more general attitudes in which he is placed by the relations he sustains to the world. I have exhibited him as the man of business,—as mingling with his fellow men from day to day in the common concerns of life; and have endeavored to sketch an outline of the course which becomes him in that relation. And I have contemplated him in the social circle,—associating for purposes of enjoyment or improvement with those who have not the ‘like precious faith’ with himself; and have attempted to discriminate between those social meetings which he may, and those which he may not, encourage by his presence. It only remains to contemplate him in the more particular attitude of communing with men of the world in respect to their immortal interests;—a duty which most professors are equally ready to admit in theory, and to neglect in practice.

I. What are some of the CHARACTERISTICS OF THE RIGHT PERFORMANCE OF THIS DUTY?

1. *Discretion.*

There should be a discreet reference to *time, place, and circumstances.*

In general, this duty is attempted with the best hope of success, where there is no one present to listen to the conversation. In all ordinary cases, where you approach an unrenewed sinner in respect to his salvation, especially where his mind is not, in some good degree, awake to the importance of the subject, you place him at once in circumstances in which, at best, he is likely to feel little freedom, and in which the presence even of an individual may not improbably subject him to great embarrassment ; and if he is abruptly accosted in the hearing of several persons, even though they may be his intimate friends, it will not be strange if his mind revolts into a state of positive anger. I am aware that some professors of religion, and even ministers of the gospel, have thought it meet to adopt a somewhat public, abrupt, and even abusive, manner of addressing men who were indifferent to religion, for the very purpose of exciting their indignation, as a first step towards bringing them to repentance ; but I see not why such a practice does not involve the licentious principle of doing evil that good may come ; and though it should be conceded that, in some few cases, God, in the sovereignty of his wisdom, may have overruled an ill-judged conversation, as he may any thing else that is imprudent or evil, to the awakening and conversion of a sinner, I cannot doubt that, in almost every case, the legitimate result of such a course is realized, in increasing the obduracy of his heart, and in multiplying the obstacles to his salvation.

Closely allied to the indiscretion of addressing an individual in the manner just described, is that of proclaiming the result of any private conversation, especially so that it shall reach the ears of the person with whom it

has been held. The same reason which will induce a man of the world to shrink from being addressed on this subject in the presence of others, will inspire a reluctance to having any publicity given to the fact of his having been privately engaged in such a conversation ; and instances, I doubt not, have occurred in which individuals who had begun to reflect seriously, and seemed likely, humanly speaking, to be brought to repentance, have actually been driven back into the ranks of the careless, and have become more fortified against religious impressions than ever, in consequence of its having been imprudently blazoned abroad that they had revealed to some friend the secret that they were anxious for their salvation. I was sometime since informed, on good authority, of a lady who had dressed herself with some degree of extravagance, and taken her seat in the parlor to receive her friends ; and as they successively called, she informed them, without even the appearance of confiding to them a secret, that she was observing a day of *private* fasting and prayer for the conversion of her husband. Not to dwell upon the ostentatious character of such an act—so much like the sounding of a trumpet to proclaim one's secret devotions—how manifest is it that it was adapted to exert a bad influence on her husband ; and it can hardly be doubted that, if it ever reached his ears, it awakened in his mind nothing better than irritation and disgust.

After all, it is admitted that there *are* occasions, which justify a professing christian in addressing an unrenewed sinner directly, in reference to his salvation, in the presence of others. There are cases in which inquiring sinners come together for the very purpose of being individu-

ally conversed with, in respect to their spiritual condition ; and where this is *not* the case, a professor of religion may have such a knowledge of the character and feelings of the individual with whom he would converse, that he may feel himself warranted, even in a somewhat mixed company, in bringing home to his conscience the great subject of personal religion. There is no case perhaps, in which it is more important that a conversation of this kind should be held in private, than where the design on the part of a professing christian is to reprove an ungodly friend for some vicious indulgence : the reproof itself may not improbably be more than will very quietly be borne ; but if, in addition to that, it comes in a way fitted to give publicity to the offence against which it is directed, the almost certain effect will be that, instead of leading to salutary reflection, it will only awaken violent prejudices and bitter resentment. Nevertheless there are instances in which it is plainly the duty of a professor to reprove an individual for his transgressions, even though the occasion be somewhat public, at the very moment of their being committed ; and to connect with the reproof a solemn admonition to repentance. This may be incumbent upon him, not only from a regard to the best interests of the individual whom he addresses, but from a respect to those around him, and even to his own christian character ; for though the person to whom the admonition is administered may not be profited by it, peradventure some who hear it may be led to apply it to themselves ; and if no other end is gained, he will at least have exhibited the independence and consistency of a christian. No doubt a christian may be providentially present in a scene in which there is so much riot and blas-

phemy, and the bad passions of the heart are so madly acted out, that to attempt any thing, in the way of reproof, would result in nothing but increased evil ; but in all ordinary cases in which he witnesses an exhibition of vice in any form, in the presence of others, he is doubtless bound, in some way, to administer a reproof, or at least to testify his disapprobation, as publicly as the offence was committed.

There are peculiar advantages for the discharge of this duty in the season of affliction. Though affliction, in itself considered, has no sanctifying efficacy, yet it *has* a tendency, for a time at least, to subdue the spirit and soften the heart. It teaches, more impressively than almost any thing else, the emptiness of worldly joys, and the value of the sustaining influences of religion ; and many a man who, in other circumstances, might manifest an utter disregard to the gospel, and even trifle with the christian's hope, has, in the dark day of adversity, been brought to feel that it were worth more than the world has to bestow, to be a true disciple of Christ. Prosperity naturally makes the careless sinner more careless ; and the sceptic it has a tendency to confirm in his scepticism ; but let affliction come, and even though there may be no permanent good accomplished, it is more than probable that, for the time, the heart will become more tender, and the understanding more open to the truth. At such a season then, the christian may, with great advantage, press the sinner's conscience with the obligations of religion ; he may bring before him the most momentous truths in the most solemn manner ; and in all ordinary cases, instead of giving offence, he will be listened to with earnest attention and deep interest. And there is good

reason to hope that the impressions which are thus made, especially if followed up by a repetition of serious counsels and admonitions, may prove the germ of a thoroughly renovated character. What christian who has been in the habit of mingling as a counsellor and comforter in scenes of affliction, but has been struck with the fact, that there is no difficulty in conversing with unrenewed sinners, in such circumstances, in respect to their salvation ? Instead of objecting to it even in their feelings, they almost of course expect, and often desire, it ; and where such an occasion is suffered to pass without any such improvement on the part of their christian friends, no doubt it frequently leaves a sad impression in respect to the consistency and the fidelity of the professed followers of Christ.

A season of revival also, brings with it the most favorable opportunities for the discharge of this duty. There are many then who are ready enough to acknowledge themselves anxious in respect to their eternal interests ; and who regard it a privilege to open their hearts without reserve to their christian friends, and listen to their counsels and instructions : and there are many others in whom fear, or shame, or some other worldly principle, operates to keep them from frankly disclosing their feelings, who yet are deeply impressed with the great truths of religion, and are as anxious perhaps as any around them to know what they shall do to be saved. At such a moment it is not uncommon to find sinners in all the various states of mind ;—from a bitter and scoffing opposition to the work, down to absolute despair of the mercy of God ; and while far the greater part of them are ready to be conversed with, and count it a privilege

to be conversed with, there is abundant reason why they should all, so far as possible, be personally addressed ; not only because, in most cases, the ear is open to receive instruction, but because the Spirit is peculiarly ready to give it effect. I may appeal to any christian who has mingled in such a scene for evidence of the fact, that the reserve which exists, at other times, in respect to religious things, usually melts away then ; and that while suitable counsels and directions come easily to the mind of the christian, they flow with equal ease from his lips, and as readily find a lodgment in the understanding and heart to which they are addressed. That professor, therefore, who neglects the opportunity afforded by a revival, of conversing freely with the unrenewed, is chargeable, to say the least, with the indiscretion of overlooking or abusing a highly important means of doing good.

There should also be a judicious reference to *the relation that exists between the individual performing the duty, and the person with whom he attempts to converse.*

Suppose, being a professor of religion, you would address on the subject of his salvation an individual of nearly your own age, of the same standing in life, and withal one with whom you are intimately acquainted—you may reasonably take advantage of all these circumstances to approach him with the greater freedom. Or suppose the individual to be much younger than yourself, or to occupy a place in society much below you, or to be dependant in some sense upon your care and kindness ;—suppose, especially, that he be a child, or a servant, who is not only subject to your authority, but naturally looks to you for direction—here again, you may enter on this duty with a degree of familiarity which would ill be-

come some other circumstances ; inasmuch as the relation you sustain to the individual is that of a superior to an inferior. But let the case be changed, and suppose yourself in the humbler place, and the person whom you address in the higher ;—be it that you would approach a man in reference to his immortal interests, who is so far above you that you would scarcely think of coming near him in any of the ordinary concerns of life ;—be it that you are a servant, and you long for the salvation of an ungodly master ; or that you are a child, and your heart sinks within you in view of the carelessness or the vices of a beloved parent—in either of these cases, the office of counselling and admonishing becomes one of extreme delicacy and difficulty ; and it were perhaps better that it should be neglected altogether, than attempted in a rash and injudicious manner. But, in almost every instance, something may be done, without any hazard of evil. If you resolve on making a direct approach to the individual, you should not only select the most favorable moment, but should recognise in your whole manner the relation you sustain to him, and should guard against leaving an impression that you are actuated by a presuming and dictatorial spirit. But in many cases you will come at your object best, indirectly. You may place a book, or a tract, in the way of the person whom you wish to benefit, which possibly he may be induced to read, and which may speak to him more appropriately and pungently, than *you* could do, if there was nothing to embarrass you. And sometimes, especially in the case of a child, much good may be hoped for from an affectionate and expostulatory letter ; for it is not easy to say what that father's heart must be made of, that will feel no relentings as he

reads over the warm expressions of filial anxiety for his salvation. Such a step will often serve happily to prepare the way for a conversation ; and instances, I know, have occurred, in which it has proved the beginning of a course of means that has hopefully resulted in reclaiming an ungodly father from the error of his ways, and saving a soul from everlasting ruin.

I know it may be said, in reply to all this, that I am giving too much importance in this matter to mere worldly considerations ; and that it matters not from whose lips the truth falls upon the ear of an impenitent sinner, provided only it reaches it. But this surely is a mistake. I acknowledge indeed that the truth, in itself considered, is of no higher importance, as declared by one person, than another ; nevertheless, in our efforts to reach the consciences of men, we are obliged to take them as they are ; and all experience proves that there is a tendency in the human mind practically to estimate the importance of a message, somewhat by the character of the person who delivers it ; and this principle *will* have its operation in the case I am considering. The legitimate inference from this is, not that an inferior should never put forth direct efforts for the conversion of a superior, but that they should be made in that modest and unpretending spirit, which becomes the relation the former sustains to the latter. And I should want no better illustration of the importance of this principle, than would be furnished by a record of those cases in which it has been practically disregarded.

This duty should be performed also with reference to *the intellectual capacity, and the degree of religious know-*

*ledge, possessed by the individual whom it is intended to benefit.*

It is not always safe to presume, from the fact that a person has a vigorous and highly cultivated mind, or even has enjoyed great opportunities for acquiring religious knowledge, that he is of course well acquainted with the truths of the bible ; for many a man of fine intellect sits under a preached gospel, during his whole life, with a mind so little interested in the truths which are proclaimed, and so entirely absorbed in other things, that he scarcely becomes initiated in the rudiments of theology : and if you will benefit him by serious conversation, you must go back with him to the very alphabet of christianity.— Admitting that he is a person of high intellectual culture, it may be necessary for you to enlighten him without seeming to have your attention drawn much towards his ignorance ; for there is danger that you will startle his pride into exercise, and that the dread of putting himself in the attitude of a learner may even prevail over the wish to be enlightened : but it is absolutely essential, if you would do him any permanent good, that, by some means or other, his understanding should be brought in contact with the truth ; for otherwise he will either remain entirely indifferent, or the actings of his mind will be of no salutary tendency. But, on the other hand, you must take care and not too hastily presume on finding a man ignorant of divine truth, where you have previously no evidence that he is so. The fact that he is in the humbler walks of life, is not to be taken as evidence of this ;—for who does not know that there are many in obscurity, who have a taste for reading and intellectual improvement, and are far better acquainted with the scrip-

tures, than the mass of those whom Providence has placed in more favored circumstances ? If, in addressing an individual, you take for granted that he knows nothing of his bible, when he is well acquainted with it, you will not improbably excite in him a feeling of resentment or disgust, which will prevent the good influence of any thing you may say. It is always wisest, therefore, when you are at loss in respect to this matter, to approach the person with whom you would converse gradually, and let his remarks reveal to you the amount of his knowledge, before you commit yourself by taking for granted his ignorance.

There is no case in which this precaution which I have suggested is more important, than where you are tempted to be drawn into conversation with a stranger, especially in the presence of those whose faith is not fully established in respect to any of the great truths of the gospel, or as the case may be, in regard to its divine authority. More than once, when travelling in a public conveyance, have I seen a man of right views, but of feeble understanding, incautiously grappling in an argument with some wily infidel or heretic, who had made himself at home on skeptical ground ; and the consequence has been that the cause of truth has suffered from being thus taken into unskilful hands ; and the lips of the well meaning advocate of sound doctrine have been closed by the ingenious cavils of his opponent ; and those who have listened, have mistaken the triumph of intellectual power over intellectual weakness, for the victory of truth over error. Many a man, and especially many a youth, has no doubt received his first bias in favor of infidelity, from hearing a lame defence of christianity, in the circumstan-

ces I am supposing ; and no one who attempts its defence in the presence of strangers, can be assured that his own failure, if he should happen to be unsuccessful, may not lead to a similar result. You may indeed be placed in circumstances, when travelling, which may render it highly desirable that you should meet objections which you may hear urged against christianity, or some of its leading doctrines ; not only because some antidote may be needed at once to counteract the poison which is thus attempted to be thrown into the minds of some of your fellow travellers, but because your silence may be interpreted by them as a virtual acknowledgment that the objections do not admit of being answered. Nevertheless, your silence cannot, in the greatest exigency, exert so bad an influence as an unsuccessful attempt to reply ; and unless you feel satisfied on good grounds of your ability to sustain an argument, prudence will dictate that you should either say nothing, or simply state your opinion with some scripture declaration in support of it.

There should, moreover, in the performance of this duty, be a proper regard to *the state of the individuals' mind concerning the great subject on which he is to be addressed.*

Perhaps you may be aware that he has strong prejudices, either against christianity as a system, or against some of its fundamental doctrines ; and the very first step towards bringing him to repentance must be an effort to remove these prejudices ; for so long as any leading truth of the bible is rejected, it is in vain to expect that the gospel will exert its sanctifying influence. In what manner then shall these prejudices against divine truth be encountered ? It is rarely the best way to assail them di-

rectly ; for the moment you undertake to reason a man out of any great error, his pride is committed in its defence ; and you will be far more likely to silence, than to convince, him by your arguments. Though he may be utterly unable to defend his positions, and may seem quite overwhelmed by the weight of your strong reasons, it will not be strange if the very mortification he experiences from this result, should fortify him the more strongly in his error, and put him in search of fresh arguments in its vindication. In most cases, you may approach him more successfully, in the first instance, with some well adapted book ; for, in reading it, he will be less likely to place himself in a defensive attitude, and more likely to keep his mind open to conviction, than if you were plying him with your arguments in a verbal controversy.— And subsequently, a recurrence to the book in private conversation may bring up the subject of it ; and this may be an easy introduction to a statement of your own views, as there is reason to hope that the book itself may have been a happy preparation for it. But if you engage in direct discussion, let it be conducted, on your part, with the utmost calmness and good nature ; and however successful you may be in the argument, let there not be the least appearance of triumph. Let it appear that your object is truth, rather than victory ; that your desire is to do good to another, rather than to display yourself ; and there is reason to hope that an argument conducted with intelligence and skill, under the influence of such a spirit, will not be in vain.

You need not flatter yourself with the hope of disarming an individual of his prejudices against religion, so long as he is harboring a prejudice against yourself ; and

it must be acknowledged that your prospect of success is small, provided he regards you with no higher sentiment than indifference. If you would attempt this under the most favorable auspices, I would advise you, if circumstances permit, to endeavor to gain the affectionate regards of the individual, and keep him under the strong influence of your kindness, till he places an unreserved confidence in your friendship; and when you have reached this point, it would not be strange if you should discover that you had little more to do, in order to undermine the fabric of his errors, and bring him to rest on the sure foundation. I cannot forbear here to record a case which, some years ago, fell under my observation, as a striking illustration of the course which I would condemn on the one hand, and of that which I would recommend on the other. A youth, owing to some peculiar circumstances in which he had been placed in the early part of his education, had embraced one of the most dangerous systems of error; and from the time that he became a member of college, he found himself branded as a heretic. Not being averse to propagating his errors, he was in the habit of disputing with every body that would engage with him; and unhappily, he was too often encountered with harsh epithets, and in an unkind and hasty spirit, which had no other effect than to cherish his prejudices against the truth, and confirm him in his delusions. Nothing appeared but that his life would be devoted to the propagation of a system of doctrine, which, for the great purposes of salvation, has, in no respect, the advantage of the religion of nature; for so inveterate had become his prejudices against the doctrines of the gospel, that he could scarcely bear to hear one of them defended or even named. But not

long before the close of his collegiate course, an individual of an uncommonly exemplary and amiable character joined the institution, who, from some cause or other, became specially interested for his conversion ; but the course which he adopted was far different from that which had been adopted in the same case by any individual before him. He found frequent occasions for associating with the young man, and took care to converse with him on topics in which he knew that he was specially interested ; and by his bland and attractive manners, his amiable and cheerful spirit, and his uniform and uncommon kindness, he succeeded, in an unusual degree, in winning his confidence and affection : and though the law of christian love was always upon his lips, and his life was a constant exemplification of the power and excellency of the gospel, a considerable time elapsed from the commencement of their acquaintance, before he ever addressed him directly and personally in respect to his salvation : and the occasion of it deserves to be recorded ;—it was when he lay pale and languid upon his bed in consequence of a temporary indisposition ; and his young friend went and stood by him to offer him his sympathy, and assure him of his good and affectionate wishes ; and the smile of benevolence played upon the sick man's countenance, and the spirit of resignation beamed from his eye ;—it was just then, when his friend looked upon him with the kindest and tenderest emotions, and could almost fancy that Christianity herself were lying there in her loveliness and her glory, and pleading with him to accept her consolations,—that that good man let fall upon his ear the first monitory expression ; and that expression had in it such unearthly benignity, and yet such un-

told earnestness, that it instantly found its way to his heart ; and it drew tears from his eyes ; and it sent him away musing in solitude concerning the reality and the power of evangelical religion. And it was not long before he went back to his friend, and put a question to him which made his heart dissolve in gratitude to God—it was nothing less than, “what he should do to be saved ?” and they knelt down together, and prayed for the regenerating influences of the Spirit of God. And now that young man who had for years been bigotted to error, found his prejudices against the truth yielding like wax before the fire ; and he was prepared to recognise Christ as an atoning Saviour ; and presently, if he were not deceived, he found rest to his soul. I do not say that his mind was instantly established in every part of the truth ;—that was not to be expected—for his prejudices had grown with his growth, and strengthened with his strength ; but when his conscience came to be awakened, the cardinal doctrines of the gospel he embraced at once as his only hope ; and as for the rest, he received them by a gradual process, till, at no distant period, he held with firm conviction the whole system of evangelical christianity. Had that excellent and now lamented friend pursued the course which was so commonly adopted in respect to him, and roused his prejudices by calling him a heretic, instead of securing his confidence by offices of good will, not improbably he might have been, to this day, groping in error, and by corrupt ministrations contributing to the ruin of his fellow men.

As it was my privilege to be well acquainted with the individual to whom I have here referred as an example of practical wisdom ; as he was endeared to me by a

more than common friendship, and as years have passed away since he has entered upon his reward, I cannot resist the desire to leave on these pages a record of the impression I shall always bear in respect to his peculiar excellency. His lot was cast by birth in the better walks of society ; and at the age of twenty-one, he was an accomplished man of the world, without having been corrupted by its vices. Having a passion for maritime life, he went to sea at an early period ; and while he was yet comparatively young, commanded a ship in two or three voyages to the East Indies. At length, as he was traversing the deep without any other serious companion than his bible, (and of that he had been accustomed to make but little use,) there were thoughts that occurred to him in his midnight slumbers, which held his mind in deep anxiety during the day, and subsequently drove sleep from his eyes by night, and which constituted the beginning of a process that issued in a most unquestionable conversion to God ; and thus it was, while he was making his way through the pathless ocean, girt about with the dark waters and the blue heavens, that he first learned to lift his heart and voice to his Father in Heaven, not as the God of nature only, but especially as the God of redemption. On his return home, his christian friends were unutterably and delightfully surprised, to find the gay and thoughtless sailor changed into a man of prayer ; and in consequence of their advice in connexion with his own deliberate consideration of the indications of Providence, he resolved to quit the ocean, and devote himself to the christian ministry. And so he did. After going through with a preparatory course, he entered one of our colleges, where, in due time, he was honorably gradu-

ated ; and having devoted himself, for a season, to the study of theology, he enjoyed the delightful and long wished for privilege of being approved by the proper ecclesiastical authority as a preacher of the gospel. His first efforts in the pulpit served to confirm the hope which his general character had already awakened, that he was destined to be extensively useful in the church ; but no sooner had he been set apart to the sacred office, and in a single sermon recognised the congregation over which he was placed as his own beloved charge, than disease fastened itself upon him with an intensity which human skill could not resist ; and within a few short months death had terminated his earthly career. Every one seemed to mark the event as among the most mysterious of God's dispensations. It was one of those instances in which the sovereign Disposer of all things forms an instrument, and polishes it with exquisite beauty, and seems admirably to adapt it to some important end in this world, and then takes it up to heaven to be used for nobler purposes, and crowned with higher honor.

I cannot get back from this digression without saying that I regard the individual to whose memory I am paying this passing tribute, as one of the finest examples of christian character, and I may say of natural attraction, it has ever been my privilege to witness. The powers of his mind, though symmetrical and well balanced, were in no other respect particularly distinguished. But his heart was generous as heaven ; and it would often dissolve at even hearing of another's wo. His manners had been highly cultivated by his intercourse with polished society ; but they never could have been what they were—so gentle, so dignified, so inexpressibly engaging, if there

had not been superadded to this the benign and elevating influence of christianity. His piety was a delightful compound of intelligence and feeling: while there were no airs of affected sanctity, there was the spirit of deep devotion: while there was nothing that indicated an approach to worldly levity, there was a winning and consistent cheerfulness. In his prayers, it seemed sometimes as if his spirit were let loose from earth, and were soaring away, in very deed, to heaven. I cannot believe there was a person on earth who knew him, that regarded him with indifference; and well do I remember that, when the news went abroad that the grave had taken him into its keeping, there was a sentiment of unusual grief, as there always is at the death of an eminently good man. His name is embalmed in many hearts; and some who read these paragraphs, will remember what he was, far better than I can describe him. May their recollections of his excellence quicken them in the way to heaven!

But to return—I can suppose that the thought may occur to some mind, that the course which was adopted in the particular case I have referred to, could not be justified, inasmuch as it left time for the young man to die in his errors and sins, before he was directly warned of either. But to this I reply that, during the period which intervened between the commencement of his acquaintance with that excellent individual, and his being first directly addressed by him concerning the salvation of his soul, he saw him living every day under the controlling and elevating influence of evangelical piety; and he heard from him much to indicate that his treasure and his heart were in heaven: indeed he saw and heard precisely that which, in the circumstances of the case, seemed adapted

to make the best impression on his mind, and to prepare him for what subsequently took place—a solemn personal conversation respecting his eternal well-being. There is a kind of zeal which sets all the maxims of discretion at nought; and which, in this case, would, no doubt, have opened its batteries of warning, and possibly of denunciation, with a view to carry both the mind and heart by storm; but though it might have been dictated by an honest conviction of duty, it would have almost inevitably resulted in defeating its own end. If the young man had actually died before the decisive conversation which brought him ultimately to a conviction of his guilt and ruin, it would still unquestionably have been true that the right course had been pursued with him; for such was the state of his mind, that there was no reason to hope that the desired change could be brought about, without some such course of preparation as that which was actually adopted.

But it may be that the individual whom you would address respecting his salvation, instead of being prejudiced against christianity, or any of its peculiar doctrines, looks upon the whole system with indifference; or if he gives to it a speculative assent, regards it with practical unconcern. So much is the carnal mind in love with its own stupidity, that there is always danger that any effort to arouse it, that is not conducted with great discretion, will result in exciting a positive prejudice against religion itself; and that the individual will not only retain his wonted carelessness, but will be the better prepared to resist all subsequent appeals that may be made to his conscience. There might be instances mentioned, not a few, in which the careless sinner, who was a speculative be-

liever in christianity, and regarded its institutions with respect, has been matured into a hardened infidel, and even a bold blasphemer, by some well meant but injudicious efforts designed to bring him to reflection and repentance. Against this evil you should guard with the utmost care ; and while you labor to arouse the slumbering conscience, should take heed that what you do is really adapted to produce that effect. A word fitly spoken to a careless sinner, on a proper occasion, will often leave a stronger and better impression, than the conversation of an hour under other circumstances ; and indeed it is often prudent in addressing an individual, for the first time, respecting his salvation, to limit yourself to a remark or two, with a view to ascertain the precise state of his mind, and prepare for a more explicit appeal to his conscience, rather than to say every thing to which the full heart of a christian might naturally prompt him. And there is such a thing no doubt as talking to a careless sinner too much—as dealing out the most pungent and awful truths so frequently, that it shall come to be considered a matter of course ; and though he may cease to be irritated by them, this very circumstance may indicate that he has become hardened under their influence so that he is incapable of feeling their power. I have known cases in which children have been so continually plied with the most solemn and awful considerations by their pious parents, that their hearts have become like the nether mill stone ; and you might almost as well speak to the winds, as attempt to impress them with the obligations of religion. It is by no means a common error that christian parents converse with their children on this subject too much : on the contrary, the prevailing error undoubtedly is that they con-

verse with them far too little ; but still there are instances in which an ardent desire for the salvation of a child prevails over parental discretion, and leads to the introduction of religious discourse so often that the whole subject of religion comes to be regarded with aversion or disgust.

Or it may be that the individual whom you wish to benefit has had the dream of carelessness broken up, and is in the posture of deep solicitude and earnest inquiry—the difficulty of approaching a person in this state of mind, is far less than in either of the cases already mentioned ; though even here there is much room for the exercise of discretion. No doubt it is the desire of every anxious sinner to converse with some christian friend respecting his condition and his duty ; still it is often regarded as a matter of great delicacy ; and many a person, under the influence of this feeling, has suffered weeks of remorse and agony to pass over him, without revealing his convictions even to his nearest friend. It is often very important, therefore, that you should approach an individual, even in these circumstances, with some degree of caution ; lest you should lessen, in some measure, your influence with him, by impairing his confidence in your judgment. And there is great discretion necessary in giving the appropriate directions to an awakened sinner, in order to prevent his return to a habit of carelessness on the one hand, and to save him from taking up with a false hope on the other. The general direction to repent and believe the gospel it is indeed an easy matter to give ; but to meet the various difficulties and objections that may be suggested by an inquiring sinner, and to apply skilfully the great remedy with reference to all the varie-

ties of feeling which may occur, is one of the most difficult duties which the christian has to perform ; and you never can expect to perform it in a proper manner, without a familiar acquaintance with God's word, a deep knowledge of the human heart derived especially from self communion, and the most careful and discriminating attention to the peculiarities of each case in which you undertake to be a counsellor. I may add that here, as in the case before referred to, there may be danger of too much conversation : the anxious sinner, by being constantly in the company of christian friends, and listening to their counsels and exhortations almost without interruption, may be prevented from communing with his own heart so far as to gain an adequate knowledge of his sins ; or else he may place an improper reliance on the efforts of others, as if *their* counsels and instructions could be put in the place of *his* repentance. No doubt it is important that he should have the benefit of being counselled by some christian friend ; but one of the most important directions to be given him is, that he should pass much of his time in searching and probing his own heart, that he may have a proper view of his own character, and of his need of an interest in Christ's salvation.

## 2. *Tenderness.*

There is much in *the very nature of the office* to require that it should be performed in the most affectionate manner ; for when you go to speak to a sinner concerning his salvation, what are some of the leading points to which you endeavor to direct him ? His own guilt and ruin ; the possibility of escaping hell and obtaining heaven ; the efficacy of atoning blood, and the power of renewing grace. You go to tell him that he is laboring

under a moral malady which, unless it is removed, must speedily issue in his eternal death ; that the Lord Jesus Christ came down from heaven, and died on the cross, that an effectual cure for this malady might be placed within his reach ; and that if he rejects it, he rejects the mercy of God in the only form in which it will ever be extended to him, and thereby seals the everlasting ruin of his soul. And are topics like these to be treated otherwise than in the spirit of kindness ? What would you say of a physician who should go to the bedside of a sick man apparently sinking under some alarming malady, and should prescribe for him with an air of carelessness or severity, which seemed to say that it was of little moment to him whether his patient lived or died ? Admitting even that the individual had brought himself into this condition by his imprudence or his vices, would this be considered as the semblance of a reason why his physician should regard his sufferings with insensibility, or even the appearance of it ? Shall the spiritual physician then be wanting in tenderness, when he undertakes to prescribe for the disease of the soul, especially as the remedy which he proposes is nothing less than the blood of the Lamb of God ? Is there not a revolting discrepancy between the tenderness of dying love on the one hand, and a cold and insensible manner of recommending it on the other ?

But there is much also in *your own condition, and the relation you sustain to the individual whom you address*, which should lead you to discharge this duty with tenderness. For not only is he a member of the same great family with yourself, a partaker of the same nature, endowed with the same capacities, and an heir to the same

interminable existence, but his spiritual condition is the very same from which you have just emerged ; and what is more, you owe it to the rich and sovereign grace of God that that condition is not your own at this hour. And besides, you are even now but partially sanctified ; you carry about with you a body of sin and death ; and though the Holy Spirit offers to dwell continually in your heart, you often grieve him away by the indulgence of your corruptions. I ask you then, is it for a person in such circumstances, to perform such an office, with any other spirit than that of tenderness ? If you are tempted to do so, look back to the rock from which you were hewn, to the ruin from which you have but just escaped, and see whether you do not read in your past experience a rebuke to the first risings of an unkindly or even indifferent spirit. Nay, you may turn your eye inward upon your own heart, and observe the prevalence and the power of indwelling sin ; or you may examine your own best services, and notice the imperfection by which they are marked ; and then bring home to your conscience the question whether it becomes one who has but thus partially escaped from the dominion of sin, to address one who is yet entirely under its power, in a manner which would seem to say, not only that he is perfect in holiness, but that he owes this perfection to no other being than himself.

I may add also that it is necessary that this duty should be performed in the spirit of kindness, *in order that there may be a reasonable hope of its being attended with success.* There is a power in human kindness which scarcely resides in any thing else : make an individual feel that you are sincerely desirous of promoting his happiness,

and that you regard him with strong and deep affection, and no matter what may be the object you wish to gain, you have a hold upon him which, in all ordinary cases, will secure to you his cordial co-operation. I acknowledge there are cases in which the enmity of the heart against the truth of God is so strong, that it will hold out against the prayers, and tears, and tenderest expostulations, of christian friendship ; and I have known the man who, on all other occasions, evinced a becoming gentleness and benignity of spirit, kindling into rage when the subject of his salvation was mentioned to him in the kindest manner, and by his nearest friend ; but such cases are comparatively rare : it will almost uniformly be found, where a christian approaches an unrenewed sinner with the spirit of kindness in his heart, and the law of kindness upon his lips, that he will at least secure a respectful and attentive hearing ; and there is always reason to hope, in such circumstances, that the truth which falls upon the ear, may penetrate the heart, and become the seed of a renovated nature. But, on the other hand, where this office is performed with an air of freezing indifference or cutting severity, where the person who undertakes it assumes the stern attitude of a dictator, rather than the affectionate attitude of a friend, nothing better can be expected than that he will kindle a spirit of resentment against himself, and what is worse—produce an increased aversion to the truths he endeavors to inculcate. The very same truths and even the same words, uttered in a spirit of kindness, and in a spirit of severity, will often produce directly opposite effects. What is said, in each case, is equally weighty and important ; but, in the one case, the individual feels that

you are his friend, and the kindness which breathes in your manner opens a passage to his heart for all that you say : in the other, he gets the impression that you care little or nothing for him, and turns away from your admonition with a degree of disgust proportioned to the severity with which it is administered.

### 3. *Fidelity.*

This will discover itself *in leading you to take advantage of every suitable opportunity for the discharge of this duty.* To a person who is indisposed to the performance of it, it is always easy to find apologies for remaining silent ; and though the most favorable opportunities may occur every day, they will either pass unobserved, or, if they *are* observed, some excuse will suggest itself for allowing them to pass unimproved. It is easy for a person in these circumstances to imagine that he has not a talent at such kind of conversation ; or that the time may be less favorable than some other ; or that the relation he sustains to the individual who should be addressed, renders it a matter of delicacy for him to introduce such a topic, while the real fact is that he has the opportunity, the ability, every thing, necessary to the performance of this duty, except the disposition. If you will be faithful on this subject, you must have no such trifling with conscience ; but instead of seeking apologies for the neglect of opportunities which occur, you must make it part of the business of every day to watch for their occurrence. And if you do this, you will find them incomparably more numerous than you would expect ; scarcely a day will pass, but you will find yourself in circumstances to justify you in communing with the conscience of some irreligious friend ; or, at least, in

dropping upon his ear some monitory word which, by God's blessing, may sink into his heart. It is proverbial that a man who is deeply interested for the accomplishment of any worldly object, will be vigilant for opportunities to carry it forward, and will often turn to good account circumstances which, at first view, might seem unpropitious. Let the christian act upon the same principle—as he will, if he is faithful—and he will witness a similar result ; and he has reason to hope that his watchfulness for opportunities of thus doing good, may be rewarded by the grateful benedictions of some who were ready to perish, and who, but for him, might have passed a wretched eternity.

Fidelity in this matter discovers itself *in overcoming an unworthy timidity*, by which the christian is often tempted to the neglect of this duty. You look upon some careless friend, and you realize the danger of his condition, and the importance of some effort being made to waken him from his lethargy, and bring him to repentance ; but you know that this is a subject upon which he does not wish to be addressed ; and you fear perhaps that any thing you might say he would consider as indicating an unreasonable officiousness ; and that the result would be that he would regard you with diminished favor—perhaps with positive aversion ; and in view of all this, you are ready to shrink from the duty altogether. But rely on it, fidelity requires that this suggestion of the adversary, (for you may be assured it is nothing better,) should be instantly and resolutely resisted ; and you are to gather the requisite courage for the duty by coming out of your own weakness, and casting yourself upon Him in whom dwells everlasting strength. I do not mean

that you should cultivate that boldness which laughs at discretion, and disregards consequences ; but I would have you beware of that timidity which shelters itself under the name of prudence, and looks on coolly and sees immortal souls perish, without ever lifting up the voice of admonition or remonstrance. While I am a warm advocate for genuine prudence in relation to this subject, I cannot doubt that much of that which assumes this name, has in it the elements of treason to the Master, and of cruelty to the souls of men.

It is also a dictate of fidelity that *you should press the sinner's conscience solemnly and earnestly with the plain truths of God's word.* There are cases, I acknowledge, in which the most that the circumstances will warrant, and of course all that duty requires, is to let a single note of warning fall upon the sinner's ear ; and sometimes even that had better come only in the form of an allusion ; but, if I do not greatly mistake, it is a fault with a large part of professing christians who intend, in some sense, to perform this duty, that they too often satisfy their consciences, even in the most favorable circumstances, with making a remark or two to an irreligious friend, which has some general bearing on religion, instead of entering into a conversation with him, which is adapted to bring him into the posture of serious reflection and anxious inquiry. When they hear the great duty which christians owe to unrenewed men, expounded and urged, they take the comfort of thinking that there is no reproof in all this administered to themselves ; because, in conversation with their irreligious friends, they have occasionally made an allusion to the doctrine of providence, or to human mortality, or to the uncertain tenure by which we hold our

earthly enjoyments. Remember that if you will be faithful, you must do much more than this—admitting that there is no reason against it growing out of your peculiar circumstances, you are to endeavor, with all plainness and solemnity, to bring before the sinner's mind the great and awful truths of the bible ; to press them upon his conscience as a matter of personal concern ; to do your utmost to disturb the dream of impenitence, and save the soul from all false refuges, and bring it at once to the atoning Saviour. Not only by what you say, but by the manner in which you say it, you are to let him see that you are dealing in momentous realities ; and, if possible, to impress him with the conviction that he cannot turn a deaf ear to your admonitions, but at the fearful hazard of losing his soul.

I know of no situation in which it is so difficult to deal faithfully, in this respect, with an impenitent, and especially a careless, sinner, as when he is lying amidst the agonies of a death bed. Such a case, under the most favorable circumstances, presents difficulties that are truly appalling ; for the mind is ordinarily in an enfeebled, or stupid, or agitated state ; and the body is tortured with pain ; and there are often important worldly concerns to be adjusted ; and not improbably the heart is filled with anguish in the prospect of a speedy separation from those who are most endeared to it:—all these circumstances seem to oppose a mighty obstacle to the efficacy of divine truth, even if it is plainly and faithfully exhibited. But, in many cases, there are still greater difficulties to be encountered : the dying man may have brought with him, even into the dark valley, the most obstinate prejudices against the gospel ; or he may be scarcely more en-

lightened in respect to it, than if his home had been in a heathen land ; or his friends, out of mistaken tenderness, may fear to have any thing said that should alarm him, and possibly may even tell him that he has nothing to fear for the future ; or his physicians may urge the importance of his not being disturbed, alleging the possibility that medicine may yet do its office ; and finally,—though this is not a common case,—the dying man himself may retain his aversion to God's truth to such a degree, that he will be unwilling to listen to it, even while his feet are beginning to slide. Where such an assemblage of obstacles exist, perhaps the case, so far as human agency is concerned, must be regarded hopeless ; and nothing remains for the christian who would fain stand by that death bed to instruct, and counsel, and warn, but to enter into his closet, and wrestle in faith with God that the sovereign and converting influences of his grace may be extended to that immortal spirit, before the last moment of its probation has fled. But no doubt *some* of these obstacles may exist, and yet the christian, by a due degree of firmness, and prudence, and tenderness, may overcome them. I will only say, if you have a friend or an acquaintance in these circumstances, you are bound, by every consideration, to do your utmost to overcome them ; and if that friend or acquaintance goes into eternity without being warned of his danger, and exhorted to repentance, you should at least secure to yourself the consolation that you were not to blame ; that you had done all you could to gain access to him, as a christian friend and counsellor, but that your best efforts had been unavailing.

In respect to the particular course to be adopted in the case I am supposing—admitting that you have so far overcome the obstacles in your way as to secure an opportunity for conversation—I would have you hold up the great truths of the gospel just as in any other case, unless it be that your manner should gather increased solemnity and earnestness from the consideration that you are communing with a soul whose destiny is just about to be fixed for eternity. There is no time then for speculating on unessential points, or dwelling minutely on any one doctrine, however important; but if the individual is ignorant, you can hope for no good result unless you first enlighten him; and in order for this, you must exhibit the truth in its utmost simplicity, and in its proper order and connexion. You must hold up the law in its amazing extent and fearful sanctions, as a means of producing conviction of sin; and then you must quickly exhibit the atoning sacrifice of Christ, and the grace of the Holy Spirit, as furnishing the only refuge into which the sinner can throw himself and be safe. You must distinctly state the terms on which salvation is offered; and especially the cardinal condition of faith in the Lord Jesus Christ; and must set forth the *nature* of that faith, as well as of other christian graces, so that he shall be guarded against building on a false foundation. And you must urge the peculiar circumstances of the case, as a most powerful consideration to lead him to *immediate* repentance; especially the fact that his whole work for eternity is yet upon his hands, and the shadows of the night of death are already closing around him. It is indeed a matter of fearful uncertainty whether any thing you can do will avail to the great end you wish to accomplish;

but this uncertainty constitutes no reason why you should not do all that you can ; for, in this way, admitting that you have not neglected his immortal interests before, you will at least have kept yourself clear from his blood, and, it may be, that you will have saved a soul from everlasting death.

There is an impression which prevails somewhat extensively, not only among persons who make no pretensions to piety, but also among professed christians, that, in many cases at least, the subject of religion cannot be introduced at a sick bed, without jeopardizing the recovery, or as the case may be, hastening the death, of the patient. I will not say that instances of this kind never occur ; and I am well aware that, along with fidelity there is a great demand for discretion, in the performance of this duty ; but I am satisfied that it is a rare case indeed that a sick person is injured in respect to his bodily state, by being properly addressed in regard to his salvation ; and often no doubt, the introduction of such discourse would be a benefit, rather than an injury, by drawing out feelings of anxiety which have been gathering in the soul, but which, from the pride of consistency, or the fear of the world, or some other consideration, the individual has been unwilling to disclose. A striking illustration of this is furnished by the following fact, which was narrated to me by one of the most eminent clergymen in this country. A gentleman in one of the southern states, who had a considerable standing in society, and had been for many years an infidel, was seized with a violent disease, and within a short period, was apparently at the gate of eternity. He discovered an unusual restlessness of spirit, and seemed at times to be suffering the deepest

agony ; but as his friends around him knew he had been accustomed to glory in his infidelity, not one of them had the courage to direct his thoughts to an atoning Saviour, or even to allude in his presence to the general subject of christianity. At length, however, one of his friends, a clergyman, visited him,—if I mistake not, the very clergyman who gave me the information,—and in the spirit of christian friendship, he approached him with a reference to the gospel as the only foundation of a sinner's hope ; and instantly he found that he had wakened into exercise the keenest sensibility ; and the secret at once came out that that infidel's bravery had all left him in the prospect of dying ; that he had for days been scarcely able to sustain the agony of his mind, while yet he had been too proud to speak of it to those around him ; and there he lay struggling in anguish with his infidel prejudices which had gathered strength with his advancing years ;—and though he earnestly wished to believe in the christian religion, he declared that he found himself utterly unable to do it. The clergyman began by presenting before him some of the simplest evidences of christianity ; and the sick man listened with the deepest attention, and apparently with the docility of a child : he then proceeded to other proofs, and gradually conducted him through the whole field of evidence, and showed him that the bible *must be* the word of God ; and his reasonings and illustrations were heard with the most solemn earnestness ; and under their influence, accompanied no doubt by the higher influence of the Spirit of God, those prejudices against the gospel which had been the growth of nearly a whole life, melted away ; and then the minister explained to him the great doctrines of the

gospel, and showed him that Jesus Christ was the only refuge, and besought him to repair to that refuge as he valued his soul. The consequence of all this was that, from the hour that infidel had an opportunity to unburden himself, by acknowledging his anxiety, and giving vent to feelings of anguish which had escaped only through his bewildered and terrified look,—from that hour the violence of his disease seemed to abate ; and though it ultimately proved fatal, there was every reason to believe that his life was prolonged several weeks, in consequence of this disclosure ; and there was some ground to hope that, before his death, by a miracle of mercy, he actually realized the consolations of that religion which he had so long regarded as a fable.

But even admitting the possibility that an unrenewed sinner, in these circumstances, may experience a shock, from being faithfully addressed by a christian friend, which may hasten his disease to a fatal crisis ;—is there nothing after all to be said in favor of such a measure, from the fact that he is utterly unprepared to die, and that, if he leaves the world in his present state, he leaves it for an eternity of wretchedness ? What is the death of the body to the death of the soul ? What is the evil of having this brief period of existence shortened a few hours, or even a few days, compared with the evil of running an everlasting round of ages in the world of wo ? Observe, I am far from admitting that such a course as I have suggested would be likely, in any ordinary case, to increase the violence of the malady, or hasten the action of death : I only say that if such were the case, the objection might be most triumphantly met by a comparison of the interests of time with those of eternity. Is it a

great matter that that poor dying sinner should receive a shock by being honestly apprized of his condition, and urged to immediate repentance, or that he should even be convulsed with terror by an effort to save him, while on the borders of the dark valley ; and is it a thing of no consideration that he should be left to sink under the influence of deep delusion into the arms of the second death ?

I have spoken of the importance of pressing the sinner's conscience with the plain truths of the bible : let me say that fidelity requires also that, where it is practicable, *efforts of this kind should be repeated*, and a course of effort adopted and persevered in, until, by God's blessing, the desired end is accomplished. In addressing an individual for the first time, you may seem to produce little effect upon him, and perhaps may be ready to give up the case as well nigh hopeless ; but after all, you may have cast into his mind seed which, being carefully watched and faithfully watered, may spring up and bear fruit to eternal life. The impression which has been made may be so feeble that it may require but a single breath to efface it ; nevertheless it may be a genuine impression of God's truth ; and if followed up, it may be deepened into conviction of sin ; and in the train of that may follow a sound conversion ; and the result of the whole may be the salvation of the soul. Where the conscience has been, in any degree, awakened, there is a double reason why you should persevere in your efforts to bring the case to a favorable result ; for if the individual sinks back into his accustomed lethargy, he not only loses the ground he has gained in respect to the attainment of salvation, but increases the probability that no

subsequent effort that may be made to rouse him to reflection will prove successful.

I only add that fidelity requires that *you should continually recognise your dependance for the success of your efforts on the influences of divine grace.* Whenever you are about to approach this duty, unless circumstances absolutely forbid it, you should supplicate the teachings and guidance of the Holy Spirit ; realizing that, without his aid, you will accomplish nothing, or nothing to any good purpose. And it is always desirable that with the conversation, especially where it is continued to any length, and seems to awaken serious feeling in the individual whom it is designed to benefit, should be joined humble and fervent prayer ; for while this is the appropriate means for securing a blessing on the conversation, it is adapted, more than any thing else, to influence the thoughts and feelings directly in favor of religion. More than once have I witnessed an individual with apparently but little feeling, while he has been faithfully and earnestly addressed in respect to his salvation ; but when he has risen from his knees at the close of a prayer which has followed the conversation, I have found him dissolved in tears, and going away with a resolute determination that he would seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness. Remember, then, that, as your ultimate dependance in this matter is upon God, so you are bound continually to wait upon him for his blessing ; and if you join with your conversation not only the spirit of prayer, but the act of prayer, you have good reason to expect that your labor will not be in vain in the Lord.

**II. What are some of the CONSIDERATIONS BY WHICH THIS DUTY IS ENFORCED ?**

1. *The importance of the interests at stake.* If you had a friend whom you knew to be in imminent danger of losing a large estate, and of being plunged with his family into the depths of poverty, and at the same time were acquainted with some fair and honorable expedient, by means of which he might escape the calamity which threatened him, you would feel yourself instantly impelled, by the dictates of friendship, to apprise him of his danger on the one hand, and of the means of his escape on the other. But suppose that, instead of sustaining pecuniary loss, he was in danger of forfeiting his character, or at least of rendering himself unnecessarily the object of suspicion and reproach ;—and suppose you had it in your power, by a single conversation, or by several successive conversations, with him, to avert *this* evil—should you not feel that you had acted a part unworthy the character of a friend, if you made no effort to preserve his good name ? Or suppose, yet again, that you knew that a plot was maturing for the destruction of his life ; or that he was walking in the dark towards the verge of a precipice, where a fall would be certain and instant death ; or that, in an hour of insanity, he was making the strange and horrible preparation for suicide ; would it not be well nigh the guilt of murder that would rest upon you, if you did not interpose your best efforts to prevent so fearful a result ? But in the case to which I am directing your attention, there are interests involved, compared with which, property, reputation, life itself, dwindle to insignificance. That unrenewed friend whom you are called upon to admonish of his danger, and point into the path to heaven, has within him a spirit which must survive the dissolution of the body in unutterable

glory or wo ; and not an hour passes, but his destiny for eternity may be fixed. Fasten your eye, if you will, upon a period separated from the present by as many millions of ages as you could count during a century, and that friend will have been continually advancing, and will still be advancing, and will be destined to advance eternally, into scenes of higher ecstacy, or deeper agony, according to the character which he possessed at the moment when the earthly tabernacle went to ruin. If he dies in his present state of impenitence, the combined energies of the whole creation could not save him from realizing the fearful side of this momentous alternative ; and what you are called upon to do, is to lift up your voice, and reach forth your hand, to turn that immortal soul, if possible, into the path of endless life. Say whether here is not an object worthy of the most vigorous and untiring efforts ? Where is your benevolence, where your humanity, where especially your claim to be considered a disciple of Him who died that sinners might live, if you can see immortal beings sink into the arms of a never dying death, and yet say nothing, do nothing, for their salvation ?

But it may be that the individual towards whom you are called upon to perform this duty, sustains to you a relation of the most endearing kind : he may be your husband or your brother, your parent or your child ; and you may have a conviction amounting well nigh to an assurance, that he has yet to repent or perish ; and you know full well that he holds his life by so feeble a tenure that the motion of an atom might break it ;—and is it possible that, in these circumstances, you can hesitate as to the question, whether you shall put forth an effort to rouse

him from his slumber? To save him from temporal evil—from sickness, sorrow, or death, there is no sacrifice which you would not cheerfully make; and when he stands before you in the attitude of a perishing sinner, turning his back upon heaven, sporting, it may be, in his own delusions, and moving onward with the rapidity of time towards the world of despair, is there nothing here to appeal to your sensibilities, or call forth your efforts? I put it to your conscience, are you willing to stand still, and look coolly on, while the perdition of your dearest friends is sealed? Have you counted the cost of this course, so that you are pursuing it with your eyes open to its results? Have you thought of the meeting at the judgment? Have you weighed well the import of that word *eternity*, as it stands connected with the loss or the salvation of the soul?

2. *The encouragement you have to expect success.* If you look at the object towards which your efforts are to be directed, you may see in it much to encourage the hope that they will not be in vain; for it is the same which, from eternity, has attracted the regards of the infinite God; for which He who is the brightness of the Father's glory assumed our nature, and labored, and suffered, and died; for which he still carries forward his mediatorial work; and in which all the inhabitants of heaven rejoice, and will rejoice through eternity. Besides, it is an object for which the great Master has explicitly commanded his people to labor, and to labor in this very way; and has abundantly indicated to them his pleasure, that if they labor with a right spirit, and in a proper manner, their efforts shall be crowned with a blessing. Is there not enough then, Christian, to encourage you to be

faithful in this work, in the fact that it has drawn out the heart of everlasting love, and that you are commanded to engage in it by Him who hath called you to virtue and glory? Does the certain prospect of success encourage you to labor assiduously and perseveringly for a great object? What other case can be proposed in which there are such considerations to indicate the certainty of success, as in that to which your attention is here directed?

But I must not forget to say that there is a voice on this subject in the experience of the church: they who have faithfully performed the duty which I am urging, have actually found that a blessing has followed their labors; and, in instances without number, they have been permitted to witness the result in a thorough conversion to God. How many young persons are there now in the church, bringing forth much fruit to the honor of Christ, whose thoughts were first directed to religion by a pious parent, or sabbath school teacher, or other near friend, in some retired but faithful conversation! And if we knew the whole history of every revival of religion, no doubt we should find that not a small part of those who become the subjects of converting grace, are first roused from their lethargy by means of some private appeal to the conscience. Indeed with the exception of the preaching of the gospel, this is the most direct and powerful means which God has appointed for the conversion of men; and this must be an accompaniment even of preaching, in order to secure to the latter its best effect. Accordingly it will be found, in all ordinary cases, that, just in proportion to the amount of discreet, tender, faithful, conversation, which christians hold with men of the world, will be the degree of anxious inquiry, and the

number of sound, scriptural conversions. In view of the blessing with which God has actually crowned the faithful efforts which his people have made for the salvation of sinners, what christian but will be encouraged to go forward with increased alacrity and zeal?

3. *The influence which will be exerted upon your own character.* The spirit which animates to a faithful discharge of this duty, is a spirit of benevolence. It is the nature of any feeling to grow strong by exercise; and this is as true of the kindlier and better feelings as of any other. Let an individual be accustomed to labor in any way for the benefit of his fellow men, and especially to have the spirit of active kindness awakened in view of their necessities or sufferings, and the consequence will be that a habit of benevolent feeling will soon be formed which will constitute one of the leading features of his character. In addressing an unrenewed sinner in respect to his salvation, provided you do it with a right spirit, you are performing the most benevolent work in which you can engage;—a work too which always requires much wisdom, and in many cases great self denial. Here then is an opportunity for the development and culture of the christian graces: he who practically recognises his obligation to labor for the conversion of his fellow men, is himself in a way to be blessed with larger measures of divine influence; to abound more in humility, in zeal, in love to the souls of men, in a regard to the honor of Christ, in every thing in short which goes to make up the christian character. And in confirmation of this statement, I ask whether you do not expect to find, and whether you do not actually find, the brightest examples of faith and piety in those who address themselves most faithfully to

this great duty? Are not those the individuals who, in all other respects, are most exemplary, and whose whole deportment furnishes the most unequivocal testimony to the sanctifying power of the gospel? If you desire then, Christian, to rise to a high point in religious attainment, and to have the world habitually take knowledge of you that you have been with Jesus, and to be able, while you are yet an inhabitant of the earth, to approximate to the glorified character of the inhabitants of heaven; you surely will find in this desire a sufficient inducement to labor, to the extent of your ability, for the salvation of your fellow men.

4. *The glory of your everlasting reward.* It were a privilege and an honor greater than human language can describe, to labor for the conversion of men, if the service thus performed were not to be recognised at all in your final retribution; because you are hereby associated with angels, and even with Jehovah himself in the noblest of all his works. But what you do in this way *has* a relation to the future, the importance of which outruns the farthest stretch of human comprehension. Yes, every faithful effort you make to bring back the wandering sinner to the path of holiness, will be a seed of blessedness in your own soul, which will spring up, and bear fruit in the next world. Even if your kindness should be requited with calumny, if the individual whom you may desire to benefit by your counsels and expostulations, should scornfully refuse to listen to them, and thereby seal his own perdition, still your fidelity shall not go without its reward. It will contribute, in some way, to swell the joy of your immortal existence, even though the abuse of it should serve, at the same time, to height-

en the undying anguish of that soul, towards which it has been exercised. But suppose you should meet in heaven a soul redeemed by the blood of Christ, but awakened and converted through your humble instrumentality ; suppose it were not a stranger, but the child of your affections or the companion of your bosom ; suppose there were not a solitary individual, but many individuals ; and suppose they should point you back to the very conversation in which you first engaged with them in reference to their salvation, and should contemplate with rapture its bearings upon their subsequent course, and especially should connect with it the eternal weight of glory, and should heap upon you their grateful benedictions, as the instrument by which their deliverance was effected ;— and I am sure you will say that, in view of such a meeting, it is easy to comprehend at least one of the elements of your reward. What that reward will be in all the height and depth of its glory, the light and experience of eternity alone can reveal ; but surely, enough is to be known in respect to it, to convict every professing christian of unutterable folly, who does not labor for its attainment.

### III. WHAT CAN BE DONE TO ELEVATE THE TONE OF FEELING AND ACTION in respect to this important branch of christian duty ?

1. *Let every professing christian resolve to act habitually under a proper sense of his own personal responsibility.*

One great reason why this duty has been hitherto so much neglected, is, that professors have looked to each others' example, and have kept each other in countenance in doing nothing. They may have sometimes felt

pressed with their obligations to this duty, and formed a partial determination to engage in it ; but they have looked around in the circle in which they move, and have perceived that they could not attempt it but at the expense of being somewhat singular ; and the result has been that they have kept along in the current, sustained by the reflection that, if they were in the wrong, almost every other professor was in the wrong with them. Now, in opposition to such a course, you must realize that you have a personal responsibility resting upon you which cannot even be shared by any other human being : others have indeed responsibilities of their own ; and they are bound, as truly as yourself, to warn the wicked of his wicked way, and, if possible, to save his soul from death ; but *your* obligation to this duty is as complete as if you were the only being in the universe on whom it devolved. Hold this thought then habitually to your minds ; and regard it as an important part of the economy of your christian life, that this service, however much of difficulty or self denial it may involve, should be faithfully performed. Let your conduct in this respect be governed by rules which are the result of meditation and prayer ; and consider it a part of your duty to lend your influence to the salvation of sinners in the way that has been described, just as truly as it is to bow the knee in the closet, or wait upon God in the sanctuary. Regard it as one of the great objects of your adoption into the family of God, and of your introduction into the visible church ; and, with such impressions rendered abiding and operative by the grace of the Holy Spirit, it cannot be but that your efforts will produce an effect that will be felt on every side of you. If every professor would adopt

this course, who can tell the amount of blessing which would thereby be secured ?

2. *Let professing christians keep this object prominently in view in their intercourse with each other.* You meet each other, from time to time, in the common concerns of life ; and have a few moments that you can devote to religious conversation ;—or else you meet as a band of christians, for the express purpose of communing together in regard to the interests of Christ's kingdom :—in either of these cases, you cannot be more profitably occupied, than in stirring each other up to this great object, in communicating to each other the result of your own efforts in respect to it, and in devising and carrying forward plans for its accomplishment. And if meetings of christians were occasionally held, in a retired way, with *special* reference to this object, no doubt the best results might be expected ; for while such a measure would be likely to bring out many important practical suggestions, it would awaken a deeper sense of responsibility, and call forth a larger amount of fervent prayer and efficient effort. Only accustom yourselves to confer together frequently on this subject, and to hold to each others' minds in connexion with it the infinite value of the soul, the danger that it will be lost, the love of God, the compassion of Jesus, and the efficacy of atoning blood ; and you will get your hearts imbued with that spirit of heavenly charity, which will lead you to do your utmost to save every soul within your reach.

3. *Each particular church or community of christians ought to feel a responsibility in reference to this subject.* Each individual member ought, as has already been remarked, to consider it part of his duty to labor in this

way, as he has opportunity and ability ; but beside these exertions of a more private and occasional sort, there should be, so far as practicable, a regular course of effort conducted by means of some distinct organization. The system of tract distribution, which has been adopted extensively, within a few years, might be advantageously extended to every city and populous town ; and where it is judiciously conducted, it is adapted to produce the happiest results. I cannot forbear to say, however, that, like every other good thing, it is liable to great abuse ; and perhaps there are scarcely any of the minor parts of the benevolent machinery of the day, which need to be entrusted to more prudent hands. It has sometimes happened that individuals to whom this office has been committed, have entered families in the higher circles of society, in a manner which has bordered closely upon rudeness ; and when the tract has been refused again and again, they have persisted in leaving it ; and in due time have called for it and insisted upon knowing whether it had been read ; and have uttered not only counsels, but reproofs, in a spirit which has indicated zeal without wisdom, and has produced evil without any mixture of good. And there is reason to fear that the occasional occurrence of such instances of imprudence, has, in some cases, diminished both the credit and the efficiency of an admirable system. But let this plan be carried into effect with prudence as well as zeal ; let individuals designated for the purpose, go around and leave a tract wherever it will be kindly received ; and let them return in due time and, in the spirit of good will and affection, converse with the members of the family, with a view to enforce the great truths which the tract has presented ; and let them

do this with a judicious reference to circumstances, and it is not easy to estimate the amount of good which may thereby be accomplished. You may gain access to many minds in this way, which you could approach in no other ; and may actually carry the truth, by means of a tract, to some who are sitting in the shadow of death, while yet they are surrounded with the broad sunshine of gospel day.

There may be another form of organization, not less efficient than the preceding ; though this also is more especially adapted to populous towns :—Let the officers of a church, or other members who are competent to the work, agree to sustain religious meetings in different districts, with special, though not exclusive, reference to the lower classes : let these meetings be conducted by prayer, by reading the scriptures and perhaps some brief and pungent discourse ; and in connexion with this there may very profitably be a word of exhortation adapted to the circumstances of those who are assembled. Let such a course be judiciously and zealously pursued, and the result will probably be that, at no distant period, there will be anxious inquirers to be conversed with ; and this may lead to the establishment of another meeting, with reference to that particular class ; and thus the field of labor will widen, while there will be need of an increased degree of that wisdom which cometh down from above, in order successfully to occupy it. I would, by no means, discourage associations for this object, of a more private nature ; but I cannot but think that it would be well if there were some such organization as I have described connected with every church, which should be subject to the control of its officers, or such other persons as might

be designated for the purpose. In this way, while a more general interest would be likely to be awakened in reference to the great object, the meetings which should be held would probably possess more attraction, and command higher respect, and accomplish greater good.

4. *Let christians in general, as they would desire to see this important object accomplished, cultivate a more deep, earnest, and consistent piety.* Most of the obstacles which stand in the way of the faithful performance of the duty I am urging, originates in a low state of religious feeling on the part of professed christians. To mention only one—no doubt many a professor refuses to obey the dictates of his conscience prompting him to this duty, on the ground that, if he were to attempt to perform it, he would seem to be contradicting the whole tenor of his daily conversation: he is so uniformly seen exhibiting a spirit of worldliness, and perhaps is so frequently found in circles of gaiety, and has so little in his intercourse with the world that indicates any concern for the salvation of men, that, even if he is sometimes pressed with his obligations on this subject, the fact of his being aware that he is regarded as a mere worldling, will furnish a strong temptation to him to put conscience asleep, lest the individuals whom he might attempt to address should be startled by his inconsistency. But let him constantly aim at a high standard of religious character, and let his conduct on every occasion be seen to be consistent with his christian profession, and he will be subject to no such embarrassment as I have described: on the contrary, he will be able to approach his careless friends, on the subject of their salvation, with a freedom inspired by the consciousness that he is acting in consis-

tency, not only with his religious profession but with his daily deportment.

But there is a more direct influence exerted here towards the attainment of this end. Let there be a spirit of earnest and elevated piety, and there will of course be a tender concern for the salvation of men. Let the christian have his own soul deeply imbued with the love of Christ; let him have intimate communion with God, and bright views of heaven, and solemn impressions of eternity, and rely on it, this will make him watchful for opportunities to discharge this duty; it will infuse into his counsels and expostulations a tenderness and an earnestness which will be well adapted to open a way to the heart; it will quicken his invention in devising, as well as call forth his energy and perseverance in executing, plans for bringing the truth of God in contact with the conscience of every sinner, whom it is in his power, either directly or indirectly, to approach. In accordance with this representation, it will be found that, just in proportion as a spirit of elevated piety has pervaded any community of christians, the obligation to labor for the salvation of sinners has been recognised, and ordinarily a blessing has followed, proportioned to the amount of effort and prayer with which it has been sought.

Would to God that the whole community of the disciples of Christ, of every name and of every nation, realized the importance of rising up to higher attainments in piety, as a means of carrying forward the great work of converting the world! To say nothing of the influence which would thereby be exerted in bringing christians to pray more fervently, and contribute more liberally, for the conversion of the heathen;—how manifest is it that

the cause of the Redeemer in *christian* lands would advance with increasing rapidity, and that sinners would be brought, in far greater numbers, to bow to the sceptre of sovereign grace ! Let the church then realize that her power is in proportion to her piety. Let her put on the garments of sackcloth and sit in the dust, in view of her having given out so feeble and dubious a light to a world lying in wickedness. Forgetting the things that are behind, let her press forward to those which are before.—Let her endeavor to recover the glory of the apostolic age ;—not the glory that was conferred by its miracles, but that which arose out of its deep, self denying and uncompromising piety. Let the spirit which animated the church in that period return to her now, and ere the present generation shall have tasted death, she may be giving thanks to God that the morning of a brighter day is spreading itself over the world.



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